

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

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Chapter 2

Research Issues in the Culture and Society of the Amami Islands

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1. Introduction

Kagoshima Prefecture comprises an area of southern Kyushu and a number of islands. The majority of these islands are located to the south and comprise the northerly part of the Nansei chain, which extends from Kyushu over one thousand kilometers down to the Ryukyu Islands of Okinawa Prefecture. The Nansei Islands comprise four sub-groups, the Osumi, Tokara, Amami and Ryukyu Islands, the first three of which are part of Kagoshima Prefecture. Six of the Osumi Islands and seven of the Tokara Islands are inhabited. The Amami Islands, which are located in the southernmost part of Kagoshima Prefecture, comprise eight inhabited islands located between Amami-Oshima Is. and Yoronjima Is., over a distance of two hundreds kilometers. There is a clear boundary between the Amami and Tokara Islands in terms of both flora and fauna and folk culture (SAMESHIMA 1995, SHIMONO 1986). Together with the Ryukyu Islands, the Amami Islands are part of a semitropical region home to many coral reefs and distinct plants and animals. Recently, the value of biodiversity in Amami has become apparent, and a move towards gaining registration as a World Natural Heritage region is underway. Amami is also a culturally diverse region, with significant differences in aspects of local dialects and folk culture not only among the islands but also amongst villages on the same island.

Amami culture, which has been influenced by both Ryukyu and mainland Japan, is quite unique, and the dialect, cosmology, religious beliefs and traditional performing art forms such as folk song (*shimauta*) and August dance (*hachigatsu odori*) have been studied as forms highly distinct from those of mainland Japan. Until the 1970s, these differences were primarily regarded as negative

and seen to cause of discrimination. As a result, using dialect in school was strictly forbidden, as educators were concerned that if school students could not speak standard Japanese well they would be discriminated against and/or be socially-maladjusted and lose self-confidence if they later moved to reside in urban centers in mainland Japan. Anecdotal evidence suggests there were some Amamians who lived in urban centers who often listened to *shimauta* records in private, so as not to attract attention to their difference, and many felt that they could not reveal their identity openly in mainland Japan. However, around the 1980s, the ‘otherness’ (and uniqueness) of Amami culture came to be regarded very differently. This cultural difference became regarded as a valuable asset. The success of Okinawan musicians on the national music scene and the popularity of *shimauta* in Amami in the 1990s were of importance in changing views of Amami culture. However, it was *Wadatsumi no Ki*, a nationwide hit for Amami singer Chitose HAJIME in 2002 that was epoch-making for Amami, allowing its music culture to be acknowledged nationwide. For Amami people, too, it was a landmark event because they came to rediscover the value of their own culture and to be able to have self-pride as Amamians.

It is important to consider Amami culture and society today with regard to what researchers have revealed about its unique attributes. These analyses can inform discussions regarding the future development of Amami as it strives towards World Heritage listing.

2. Studies of Amami

Despite the islands’ socio-economic underdevelopment and distance from more developed areas, Amami has produced many profes-

sionals who have gone on to work in fields such as administration, medical services, academe, the legal sector and business. The islands have also produced several excellent local historians and folklorists. About six thousand articles, reports and books on many regional topics are listed in a book entitled *Amami Kankei Shiryo Mokuroku* (Amami Data Catalogue) (IRISA 1994). The volume merits mention here as it documents the extensive research that has been undertaken on Amami Islands, a region with a population of only 110,000.

The first written record of Amami culture and society is *Nanto Zatsuwa* “Miscellaneous stories of South Island,” which was written in the mid-19th century by Sagenta NAGOYA, a young and talented samurai. He was punished by banishment to Amami-Oshima Is. on a charge of political conspiracy and lived in exile there for five years from 1851. He left more than three hundred illustrations with short descriptions about the nature and folk culture of Amami. This work, describing plants and animals, work and entertainment, religious beliefs, and the daily life of Amami people, provided a valuable record and is regarded as the most important ethnographical account of pre-modern Amami.

The academic study of Amami is generally perceived to have commenced with Kunio YANAGITA, the founder of Japanese Folklore studies, who published *Kainan Shouki* “Notes on the Southern Islands” in 1925, based on his trips to Okinawa and Amami-Oshima Is. YANAGITA came to Amami-Oshima Is. on his way back from Okinawa, his initial destination (UENO 1983a: 8). In Amami-Oshima Is., he started his trip southward from Naze, the capital, to Koniya, a port at the southernmost point of Amami-Oshima Is., by crossing a steep mountain route called Santaro Pass on foot. Then, he took a boat to Kakeroma Is., where he visited a few villages. After that, he visited a

few more villages in northwest region of Amami-Oshima Is. called Uken, and from there, he finally came back to Naze by boat. Thus he made a trip around half of Amami-Oshima Is., during which he conducted field research on annual events, folk tales, and a female priest called *noro*. The results of this trip were documented in the book mentioned above. The reason that YANAGITA became interested in Amami and Okinawa was that he was attempting to find the affinity between mainland Japan and the southern islands. In particular, he thought that the study on Amami and Okinawa would contribute in revealing not only the origin of the folk culture of mainland Japan, but also the question of where the ancestors of present-day Japanese came from.

YANAGITA’S book *Kainan Shouki* acted as an example for local historians and folklorists, and there have been a series of studies done by them since then. Among them, *Amami Oshima Minzokushi* “A monograph on the Folklore of Amami-Oshima Is.” by Yuko SHIGENO (1927) and Eikichi KAZARI’S *Amami Oshima Minyo Taikan* “General Survey on Folk Music of Amami-Oshima Is.” (1933) were especially important accounts of Amami folk culture and gave an overview of folk songs. Shomu NOBORI’S book *Dai Amamishi* “Grand History of Amami” (1949) described Amami history from ancient to modern times, and also all aspects of Amami culture from family, kinship, and religious worship to folk performing art, and is considered to be a classic of Amami studies.¹

By contrast, the first anthropological study in Amami was not undertaken by a Japanese but by Douglas HARING, an American anthropologist from Syracuse University in New York, who was in the region in 1951-52 during the period of US occupation. HARING came to Japan and Okinawa as a member of the Pacific Science Board of the National Research Council (NRC) in Washington D.C. The purpose of the NRC was to conduct

1. See also SAKAGUCHI (1921), IWAKURA (1943), NOMA (1942), KASHIWA (1954), SAKAE (1960), EBARA (1973), TABATA (1976), etc. Also each town or village has a historical and folkloristic monographs on an each town or village. For example, Naze-shishi Hensan-iinkai (1968), Kasari-choshi Shippitsu-iinkai (1973), Tatsugo-choshi rekishi-hen hensan-iinkai (1988), Setouchi-choshi hensan-iinkai (1977), Sumiyosonshi hensan-iinkai (2002), Yamato-sonshi hensan-iinkai (1981), Kikai-choshi hensan-iinkai (2000), Tokunoshima-choshi hensan-iinkai (1970), Wadamari-choshi hensan-iinkai (1984), China-choshi hensan-iinkai (1982), Yoron-cho kyoiiku-iinkai (1988), etc.

academic research in Okinawa and the Miyako, Yaeyama and Amami Islands between 1951 to 1952. HARING was sent to Amami from September 1951 to March 1952. He conducted anthropological research there for a half year, and went back to the US after a brief stay in Tokyo. The purpose of his research in Amami-Oshima Is. was to investigate and make a report about the socio-cultural and economic situation of the people in Amami-Oshima Is. to the US military government office in Okinawa. He went round Naze City and its neighboring villages and some other villages in northern Amami-Oshima Is. almost every day by a jeep with his interpreter and assistant, and conducted a participatory research on a family dinner, a party, a meeting, a concert, *hachigatsu odori*, a festival, a religious ceremony and a funeral. He also attempted to understand the situation of Amami Islands by using various statistical data provided by the local government. He conducted research about *shimauta* singers and dancers, and traditional religious people such as *norō* and *yuta*. He placed great value on photos and film recording, and filmed manufacturing processes for Oshima silk pongee, brown sugar, dried bonito and traditional boats. Drawing on his research, HARING submitted a report titled 'Scientific Investigation in the Ryukyu Islands (SIRI): The island of Amami-Oshima in the northern Ryukyus' in which he suggested that Amami should be returned to Japan immediately if the military situation allowed (YAMASHITA 1994: 67-72, HARING 1952).

After the reversion of Amami Islands to Japanese administration in 1953, the second foreign anthropologist came to Amami-Oshima Is. and conducted a fieldwork in Kakeroma Is. Josef KREINER, an anthropologist from the University of Vienna, Austria, conducted intensive fieldwork on religious worship in a village led by a *norō* in 1960 and wrote many academic articles and books on the topic (KREINER 1962, 1963).

Immediately after the reversion of the Amami to Japan, a number of researchers from mainland Japan quickly commenced fieldwork on the islands, since they were left underdeveloped during the US military occupation period. Researchers from Kyugakkai Rengo "the Association of Nine

Academic Societies" were the first to come and conducted fieldwork for two years in and their research outcome was published as *Amami: Shizen to Bunka* "Amami: Nature and Culture" in 1959. Twenty years later, Kyugakkai Rengo undertook further field research in the Amami Islands. The changes in nature and society in the twenty years between were investigated in detail and the second book, called *Amami: Shizen, Bunka, Shakai* "Amami: Nature, Culture, and Society," was published in 1982. In this way, extensive social research was carried out and intensive research documentation of folklore practice was also published.

Stimulated by Kyugakkai Rengo's field study, many Japanese anthropologists actively pursued fieldwork throughout the Amami Islands from immediately after the reversion until the first half of the 1970s. Mainland researchers found that a lot of forms of traditional culture, such as unique family and kinship systems, religious beliefs, folklore and folk legends and cosmology, which had already gone from the mainland, persisted on Amami. The main themes of Amami studies developed by these outside researchers concerned *yuta*, *norō* and organized religious worship, the kinship organizations called *haroji* and *hiki* and village community structures. Since 1975 there has been increased address to family and ancestor worship and to festivals to ensure abundant years, in addition to these previous themes. Particular attention was paid to studies of the family with regard to ancestor worship (UENO 1983b, USHIJIMA 1983).

One particular feature of Amami studies has been that researchers have aimed at generalization and theorization through comparative as well as idiographic study, based on field research on the themes detailed above. Two (related) tendencies have been evident. One has been comparative study with Okinawa, and the other with mainland Japan. These have presupposed that the comparison between Amami and Okinawa / Japan could enhance understanding of the latter's folk culture. But, however systematic, these analyses placed Amami in a dependent position rather than aiding the development of Amami studies per se.

Since the late 1970s, many Japanese anthropologists have begun to conduct their major

fieldwork projects abroad, and notable studies on Amami have been limited to research on folk music and shamanism (OGAWA 1979, 1989, 1999, YAMASHITA 1977). And now even the study of shamanism seems to be going out of fashion, along with studies on family and kinship. Only the study of folk music forms, such as *shimauta* and *hachigatsu odori*, has been pursued consistently by both domestic and international researchers.² Recent new research trends show a diversification of Amami studies to address Amami identity, Amami Buddhism, development and environment in Amami and so on.³

3. Family and society

As mentioned above, studies on postwar Amami were started by foreign anthropologists and then, in the late 1950s, mainland Japanese researchers of anthropology, folklore and many other academic fields embarked upon both intensive and extensive field research in Amami Islands. Under the influence of kinship and marriage studies in Europe and the US in 1950s and 60s, these kind of studies were actively pursued in the Amami Islands and resulted in considerable outcomes and progress.

The important kinship terminologies in Amami are *hiki* and *haroji*. *Hiki* means an ancestor-oriented kinship organization, while *haroji* means an ego-oriented kinship organization of bilateral kindred. *Hiki* is a kinship terminology with wide distribution not only in Amami Islands but also throughout the Ryukyu Islands. *Hiki* generally means a clan, and it is often used as “same *hiki* with us” when introducing with each other in daily life. In choosing a spouse, it is often said that there is “a good *hiki*” or “a bad *hiki*” (UENO 1983a: 20). A specific *hiki* consists of the descendents of both men and women from a particular ancestor. Thus, particular individuals are related to a number of *hiki*, and most of the *hiki* show an overlap of membership in a village, and thus, an exclusive group cannot be formed. *Hiki* is often said to be important as a prin-

ciple for linking relatives back over three generations but is regarded as having little use for relating more distant ancestors than that. Three generations are the same range as *haroji* (kindred) (*ibid.*).

The function of *haroji* was important not only in productive activities such as agricultural work and sugar production, and mutual aid in marriages and funerals, but also in the form of ancestor worship called *uyanko* (*ibid.*: 21). Those who played an important role in ceremonial occasions for marriages, funerals and ancestor worship were not only those who were members of same clan or lineage group, but also a spouse’s family and relatives or those who were of the same kin. Such individuals are even now asked to help in funerals and marriages, which is very different from the case in mainland Japan, where exclusive unilineal kinship groups were once very important. In Amami, a wife’s family has an important role in ceremonial occasions, and the opposite is equally true (*vice versa*). Thus, *haroji* bilateral kindred was important to a lineage or clan. This bilateral trait can be seen in such customs of Amami people as when they refer or call to elderly people, they often use the kinship terms of siblings just like their real siblings or same family members. In other words, the feature of Amami kinship discussed above with regard to *hiki* and *haroji* involves the equal existence of both ancestor-oriented and ego-oriented categories as its organizational principle (UENO 1983b). In Amami, although the principle for the continued existence of family (or *ie*) resides in primogeniture or prior inheritance by the eldest son, it is quite different from the kinship family (or *douzoku*) of the mainland in that a daughter can also be an heir before an eldest son. The marked difference between Amami and Okinawa was in elements of social organization such as family and kin. Both in Amami and Okinawa, kinship organization is based on bilateral kindred. However, there can be seen to be a marked development of the unilineal kinship group called *munchu* in Okinawa, while Amami society did not develop such a unilineal

2. For example, see OGAWA (1979, 1989, 1999), SAKAI (1996, 2005), NAKAHARA (1997), HAYWARD and KUWAHARA (2010).

3. For example, see TAKAHASHI (2006), TAKARABE (2011), TSUHA (2012), KUWAHARA (2005).

kinship group (UENO 1983a: 11)

Significant results from a comparative study of social structure in Amami arose from comparison with the social organization of mainland Japan. A notable study by two anthropologists merits special consideration here. Chie NAKANE assumed from her analysis of *hiki* that the function of kin in Amami society was much stronger and thus she concluded that Amami society is a *hiki* society (NAKANE 1964). On the other hand, Masao GAMO conducted intensive field research on the social structure of Kikaijima Is. and concluded that Amami society constitutes a *haroji* type based on bilateral kindred, which is based on the equality and distinctiveness of families. Furthermore, GAMO pointed out that Amami society lacked the kinship family system (*douzoku-sei*) and age-class system which were widely found in other Japanese societies. Thus, he concluded that Amami's *haroji* society constitutes "the third type" of Japanese village societies, which is different from the other two types of kinship family society and age-class society (GAMO 1959).

As we have seen above, Amami society can be said to be a *haroji* or bilateral society based on an ego-centered bilateral kin group called *haroji*. Amami's bilateral society also lacks a specific discriminatory ideology, and people's behavioral patterns are recognized as greatly diverse and flexible. The status of women vis-a-vis men, in particular, is greatly different from that of mainland Japan. For example, Amami women played an important role in household economy before and after the war. Women weaved Oshima silk pongee, which is Amami's specialty, and earned more money than their husbands in 1970s and 1980s, a boom time for Oshima silk pongee. Women earned a lot of money by weaving at home or at a nearby factory from morning till night, while at the same time, also doing housework. With the money that women earned from weaving, they could send children to colleges or universities as well as supporting the household economy. In the social context in which women support a family, there is a social trait of bilateral kindred in Amami society which is different from unilineal kinship family of the mainland where primary value is given to male status

or prestige.

4. Religious culture

In the Amami Islands until the end of Edo period in 1860s, religions such as Buddhism, Shinto, and Christianity were not known, but the folk beliefs such as *noro* and *yuta* had long been practiced. Funerals were not conducted by burial and cremation but by the local way called *fuso*, in which dead bodies were simply left in caves to decay. But in the last half of the 19th century, *fuso* was banned by the government, and instead, Amamians were forced to practice burials. Cremation was introduced to most of Amami Islands after the War, but in the case of Yoronjima Is., for instance, it was not until 2004 that a crematorium was built and people changed their practice from burial to cremation. During the time when burial was practiced, there was a customary practice called *senkotsu*, which literary means 'washing bones', which is unique to Amami Islands (NAGATA 1955).

Regarding the *senkotsu*, a story that I heard from a man in his thirties in Tokunoshima Is. made a particular impression. The story concerned his experience of attending the *senkotsu* of his grandfather. The man felt uncomfortable with *senkotsu* before he attended but when he held the skull that the female relatives washed with water, and when he wiped it with a cloth, he had a special feeling for the deceased grandfather and also a strong feeling of unity with his ancestors for the first time in his life. People in previous periods may have experienced a similar feeling of unity with their ancestors in this way, and thus, they might have passed down the feeling for appreciating or respecting ancestors with the practice of *senkotsu* to this date. The anecdote related above suggests that traditional customs always had some deep meanings no matter how odd they may appear to contemporary sensibilities.

The nature of *senkotsu*, and of the shift from burial to cremation in the Amami Islands, have attracted many researchers and produced a body of publications, rendering it a distinctive field of Amami studies (KATO 2010, KONDO 2004). Two other research themes merit comment. The first concerned folkloric beliefs in gods visiting from

a far sea called *niraikanai*. Initially studied by YANAGITA in the 1920s, Jozef KREINER took up the issue and developed it through his field research in Kakeroma Is. in 1960s (KREINER 1971, SUMITANI and KREINER 1977). A second topic was *onari-gami* referring to the belief that sisters have a psychic power to protect their brothers. This view has long been shared widely among the people of Ryukyu and Amami Islands. In the Ryukyu kingdom, a king was said to have ruled his people and land with the spiritual protection of his sister called Kikoe-Ogimi. In every village, a brother was said to have ruled his village under the protection of his sister's psychic power. Thus the study of *onari-gami* attracted anthropologists and folklorists, and later developed into the study of the *noros* who controlled worship rituals and their worship organizations (MABUCHI 1964). While the study of *onari-gami* was popular in 1960s, the study of shamanism in Amami became very popular in 1970s with studies of a shaman called *yuta* becoming one of the main research themes of the 1970s and 1980s. Particular attention was given to studies of the process of ritual ceremony to become a *yuta*. The first ethnographic and systematic study of *yuta* was undertaken by an Amami folklorist in the late 1970s (YAMASHITA 1977). By the 1980s, many intensive and extensive studies on the Amami Islands had been made.

Today, female priests called *noros* still exist in some villages in Amami-Oshima Is., practicing religious rites to ensure security, rich harvests and good fish catches for their villages but they are on the brink of disappearing because of aging, lack of successors and depopulation. An Amami *yuta* was once a spiritual medium, a herbal doctor and a traditional medical practitioner, but now their main role has changed to that of a fortune-teller or a sort of counselor. Elderly people often visit a *yuta* and ask her to tell their fortune and that of their families and try to follow the *yuta's* revelations, especially when some of their family members got sick, had accident, or passed away. Even some young people nowadays often come and see a *yuta* especially on the occasion of an entrance exam, a marriage, or some other important occasion.

5. Music culture

Shimauta has continued to be popular since the pre-War era, when entertainment was limited to *shimauta*, *hachigatsu odori* and *utagake*, which involved men and women singing alternately. *Shimauta* was an essential element of ceremonial occasions. Even today *shimauta* is often sung at wedding parties, which habitually culminate with a traditional *rokucho* dance by all participants.

During the high economic growth period of the 1970s many of young people were not interested in *shimauta*, preferring to sing popular songs with a guitar. However, *shimauta* has become popular again as a result of the introduction of regional *shimauta* contests and national *minyo* festivals in the 1980s. More young people became interested in *shimauta* in 1990s and 2000s, following the success of Amami *shimauta* singers in a number of prestigious national contests. Some of the winners, such as Chitose HAJIME and Kosuke ATARI became professional singers who transitioned to performing J-Pop material and recorded chart hits. Their success had a great influence on making *shimauta* popular. Since the 1990s, the number of school children learning at *shimauta* classes has increased markedly, with many having an awareness of the (slim) possibility of developing careers as performers. Another phenomenon that has occurred in Amami-Oshima Is. and Kikaijima Is. has been efforts to revive traditional culture undertaken by young people who have returned to live in the islands after periods in Tokyo or Osaka. Their time away made them aware of the value of *shimauta* and traditional music in general, and they have opened live-houses, started an FM community station and regularly organize *shimauta* concerts and other traditional music events.

The oldest descriptions of Amami folk music are present in a book entitled *Nanto Zatsuwa*, "Miscellaneous stories of South Island" which was written by Sagenta NAGOYA in 1850s. The author drew an illustration of *hachigatsu odori* together with a short explanation. However, the most outstanding study on *shimauta* was produced by two Amamians, Eikichi KAZARI and Ken'o KUBO. KAZARI collected and classified many *shimauta* lyrics in his book *Amami Oshima Minyo Taikan* "A

Grand view of folk songs in Amami-Oshima Is.” in 1933. KAZARI’s work was succeeded by KUBO who added further *shimauta* lyrics and further systematized them (KUBO 1960). Following their work, Amami folk music has been intensively studied by mainland ethnomusicologists. The work of KOJIMA (1977, 1979) and UCHIDA (1981, 1983a, 1983b) is significant for analyzing and placing Amami scales precisely between Ryukyu and Yamato scales. OGAWA (1979) and SAKAI (1996) uncovered more *shimauta* lyrics and further classified them, based on their long-term field research in Amami-Oshima Is. and Tokunoshima Is. NAKAHARA (1997) conducted intensive field research on *hachigatsu odori* in northern Amami-Oshima Is. and also systematized it. Their studies have been followed by more domestic and international researchers, and a vigorous research field continues to develop, becoming the most continuously pursued and fruitful area of Amami cultural research.

6. Conclusion

As discussed above, Amami society has been characterized by many anthropologists as a bilateral *haroji* society. This explains why the sense of common bonds between Amamians is still so strong, or why those Amamians who live on the mainland far from Amami still share a strong sense of nostalgia through congregating with each other. In this regard, Amami society is not a vertical or lineal society but rather still a bilateral egalitarian one. As I have also described, Amami women had a unique social status, as seen in *onari-gami* belief, *noro*, and *yuta*. Once, villages of Amami Islands were ruled by male chiefs and female priests. Before Satsuma rule was introduced in the early 17th century, Amami society was an egalitarian one based on bilateral kindred, or on the unique relationship between men and women. The *onari-gami* belief, that sisters protect their brothers with their guardian spirits, illustrates a unique relationship between the siblings that can be only seen in Amami and Okinawa. Echoes of cosmological belief in *niraikanai*, of visitors or strangers from far across the sea who are gods or *marebito* (a visitor from afar or a spirit bringing luck and happiness from the divine realms) can still be perceived in

Amamians’ tendency to welcome and show great hospitality to visitors and travelers from afar. This tendency has led Amamians to open themselves to outside influences.

As discussed in this chapter, the main foci of Amami studies have been firstly, kinship organization and village structures, centering on *haroji* and *hiki*, secondly, religious worship and worship organization and thirdly, folk music and dancing such as *shimauta* and *hachigatsu odori*. Unfortunately, studies of kinship organization and family have not progressed since the 1980s. Studies of *noro* and *yuta* peaked around 1980 but, after that, have also declined. The most protracted study since the pre-war time, has been studies on Amami folk music such as *shimauta* and *hachigatsu odori*, which also recently saw the participation of foreign researchers. With regard to recent research trends, studies on Amami identity, and environment and development are significant. Amami seems to be a promising research field with regard to modern issues and projecting future development. For example, Amami could provide model case studies for a set of issues such as depopulation, increasing birthrate (in Tokunoshima Is.), aging, healing, longevity society, harmonious coexistence with nature, slow life and slow food, and so on.

Also, there are other issues in Amami society that merit research, such as higher education in remote places (or satellite education), remote place education, education for ultra-small number of children, associations of Amami people in Tokyo and Kansai area, the multiple identities of the second and third generation of Amami people living outside the Amami Islands and the ontological significance of Amami situated at the border between mainland Japan and Okinawa. Thus, the Amami islands offer rich fields for research into future issues.

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