

SHINJIMA:

Vulnerability, Resilience and Island Fluidity

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ABSTRACT: Shinjima ('New Island'), a relatively recent volcanic island in south-west Japan, has undergone cycles of settlement, depopulation and re-settlement, mirroring similar circumstances encountered by many small island cultures in Japan. Throughout its history, and in the vicinity of ongoing volcanic activity, the island has experienced periods of vulnerability and resilience, marked by fluctuations in its population and leading to shifts in the island's identity. Together, these phenomena are explained using the metaphor of fluidity, emphasising continuing changes in Shinjima's environmental, social and cultural existence. As discussed in this article, in today's context, Shinjima has emerged as an example of small island revitalisation that is distinct to its locale, embodying a multifaceted identity centred on cultural rejuvenation, environmental activism and micro-tourism. Positioning this study within the field of Island Studies, the article foregrounds Shinjima by documenting its dynamic history and emphasising recent transformations that have augmented and revitalised the small island's cultural narrative in the contemporary era.

KEYWORDS: abandonment, environmental activism, fluidity, micro-tourism, resilience, vulnerability.

Introduction

Shinjima ('New Island')¹ is located about 1.5 km northeast of Sakurajima, a former island in Kagoshima Bay (Johnson & Kuwahara, 2016). It has an area of 0.13 square kilometres, circumference of 2.3 km, and an elevation of 38.6 m (Figures 1–3) (Kagoshima-shi, 2020, p. 4; Nihon no Shima e Ikō, 2012). Reaching the island from Kagoshima Port (the main part of Kagoshima City) generally requires a 15-minute car ferry ride across Kagoshima Bay, road transport around part of Sakurajima, and finally a 10-minute ride on the municipal boat.²

¹ Also known as Moejima ('Ember Island').

² An alternative route from Sakurajima to Kagoshima City's urban centre is the lengthy 90 km road around part of Kagoshima Bay.



Figure 1 – Map of Japan. Edited from Kabipan Otoko. (n.d.). Nihon no hakuchizu. www.kabipan.com/geography/whitemap/index.html



Figure 2 – Map of Shinjima and Sakurajima in Kagoshima Bay.



Figure 3 – Shinjima (Google Earth, 2022).

Shinjima is a relatively recent volcanic island in south-west Japan having emerged around 250 years ago. It has undergone cycles of settlement, depopulation, and subsequent small-scale re-settlement, reflecting similar circumstances faced by many other small island cultures in Japan, especially in recent decades (Funck, 2020; Kuwahara, 2012; Lewerich, 2020). Situated in Kagoshima Bay, on the southern part of Japan's third-largest island, Kyūshū, Shinjima has faced distinct periods of vulnerability and resilience throughout its history, situated amidst ongoing volcanic activity. These fluctuations in population have resulted in shifts in Shinjima's identity. In this article, we explore these phenomena using the metaphor of fluidity, emphasising the ongoing changes in Shinjima's environmental, social, and cultural existence.

In the present context, with a population consisting of only a senior married couple, Shinjima has become an exemplar of small island revitalisation, unique to its location. It embodies a multifaceted identity centred around cultural rejuvenation, environmental activism, and micro-tourism. This study positions itself within the field of Island Studies, approaching Shinjima from various perspectives on its own terms (McCall, 1994, p. 1). The article highlights Shinjima by documenting its dynamic history and underscoring recent transformations that have enhanced and revitalised the small island's cultural narrative in the contemporary era.

The metaphor of fluidity relates well to Shinjima, not only to define the small island's physical location, but also to emphasise the environmental, social and cultural dynamics that help define Shinjima's cultural narrative. Changes to the island, whether through natural erosion, population flows or cultural rejuvenation, might be compared to the movement of water, a metaphor that helps to show how "maritime spaces connect rather than divide" (Hessler, 2020, p. 252).

A key part of Shinjima's vulnerability has been its population decline and eventual depopulation. In the broader Japanese setting, such small island (and rural) population decline has been particularly evident, and since the end of the Second World War, 63 small islands are reported to have been deserted (Funck, 2020; Heyaneko, n.d.; Hiraoka et al., 2022). In Kagoshima Prefecture, of the region's 28 small islands, their population almost halved between 1955 and 2005 (Shinjima, *mujin-ka osore*, 2011). Further, three islands became uninhabited between 1970 and 2013: Shinjima, Mage-shima and Gajajima. As with some other Japanese small islands, the reasons for such population decline include depleted natural resources and limited employment opportunities, with larger urban settings often offering a higher standard of living (Bedford, 2023; Funck, 2020). Of these islands, only Shinjima has been re-settled, although with just two people, which occurred after a period of six years as an uninhabited island, with an operational infrastructure of water, electricity and communication (Heyaneko, n.d.).³ As Nagashima (2013, p. 75) notes, Shinjima and Katsurajima (a small island on Kagoshima Prefecture's west coast in the Yatsushiro Sea) have been particularly vulnerable in terms of their population decline.

Just a few hundred years after Shinjima rose from Kagoshima Bay, the island was settled and developed with a small village-like infrastructure similar to that of its mainland counterparts, and then went through a process of depopulation. The process of (small-scale) re-settlement occurred within a novel context, one that delineated the island within a fresh framework characterised by purpose and its ensuing outcomes. Each of these points relates to the notion of fluidity, exhibiting dynamic adaptability within a constantly changing setting. This new cultural narrative for Shinjima, an assemblage "constructed in the present" (Linnekin, 1992, p. 251), has been shaped by the fluidity created by the island's two residents, who possess a clear vision for guiding the island's future direction, particularly relating to cultural rejuvenation, environmental activism and micro-tourism.

The idea of small island vulnerability and resilience has featured much in the field of island studies (e.g., Baldacchino, 2015; 2018; Fairbairn, 2007; Gitay & Jones, 2017; Kelman, 2020). Shinjima's fluidity has also contributed to its vulnerability: its volcanic surroundings, population decline and becoming uninhabited (but not forgotten) have each helped shape the island's history, in a similar way to some of Japan's other small islands and rural communities.

In conducting this study, various methodologies were employed to explore the subject matter. The study involved a document analysis, encompassing scholarly articles, official documents, touristic branding, and published works, to establish an overview of the island and its history. On the island, observational techniques were utilised, including direct observation and participant observation, enabling first-hand insights into the small island's culture. Further, the research employed interviewing one of the two residents of the island, opting for a semi-structured interview approach to gather targeted information. Both authors have visited Shinjima on several occasions, with Kuwahara gathering knowledge from the two residents, Naoyuki Sasaki⁴ and his wife, Kazuko Sasaki (who was born on Shinjima), as well as having informal conversations with other cultural activists and visitors to the island.

³ Submarine electricity cables were laid in 1980 for electricity and telephones, and a pipe for water in 1983 ("Kinkōwan ni ukabu Shinjima o tanken", 2020).

⁴ In this article, Japanese surnames are placed after given names.

The article is divided into two main parts. The first discusses key points pertaining to the island's vulnerability, the volcanic setting, resources and depopulation, each of which has stood out as key to comprehending the island on its own terms. The second part foregrounds the island's resilience relating to cultural rejuvenation, environmental activism and micro-tourism, which are themes that have emerged over the past decade.

Vulnerability

Some of the many vulnerabilities faced by small islands include geographic isolation, restricted access to resources and smaller population sizes (Encontre, 1999; Grydehøj, 2008; Kelman, 2020). Nevertheless, some small islands have overcome such obstacles by being linked to their mainland by tunnel or bridge (e.g., Prince Edward Island), having a sufficient local industry to raise the local GDP (e.g., Guernsey), or being able to support a relatively large population (e.g., Malta). Regarding Shinjima, despite its administrative isolation within Kagoshima City, the island's small size results in limited local resources, making it vulnerable to depopulation, especially when considering travel from Kagoshima Port. Another vulnerability for Shinjima has been the volcanic region of which it is a part, which has impacted many spheres of the island's nearly 250-year existence.

New islands emerge in diverse ways (Royle, 2001, pp. 25–40). They may result from volcanic eruptions, be formed progressively over longer periods of time from corals or sediments, or develop from other forms of geomorphological change.⁵ With Shinjima, its formation was the result of volcanic eruptions in 1780 centred on the nearby island of Sakurajima ('Cherry Island'), which itself was joined to the Ōsumi Peninsula in southern Kyūshū in 1914–15 as a result of lava flows over a narrow sea channel, thereby transforming not only the terrestrial and aquatic terrain of the area, but also the lives of those who lived on and near to Sakurajima, including Shinjima (Johnson & Kuwahara, 2016). Sakurajima's eruptions between 1779–82 are known collectively as the An'ei eruption,⁶ and the volcano is still active with frequent activity that poses a persistent threat to the area. Surface and submarine eruptions in the late 18th century created new islands off Sakurajima's northeast coast, which are known as the An'ei islands (Kobayashi, 2009).⁷ Of the new islands/islets around parts of Sakurajima, Shinjima stands out in terms of its relative history of formation, settlement, abandonment, and re-settlement.

As its name denotes, Shinjima was literally a 'new island', one that formed quickly and thereby made a conspicuous addition to Kagoshima Bay. With its emergence from the seabed, the island was located within a quickly changing islandscape and seascape, all dominated by Sakurajima's volcanic influence. As an island formed from the raised seabed, Shinjima exhibits the unique environmental history of the area, which nowadays contributes to its eco-centred touristic and educational attractiveness (Kano, Yamamoto & Ono, 1996; Moriwaki et al., 2017). That is:

⁵ There are also artificial islands (Walker & Bellingham, 2011), as well as island-related sites that challenge the notion of an 'island' being surrounded by water (Hayward, 2016).

⁶ Named after Japan's An'ei era (1772–81).

⁷ Of eight main islands formed during the An'ei eruption, four are still present: Inokojima ('Wild Boar Island'), Iōjima ('Sulphur Island'), Nakanoshima ('Centre Island'), and Shinjima. Their form has changed on several occasions due to continued seismic activity and environmental erosion (Kotō, 1916–17, pp. 48–53).

Johnson & Kuwahara: Shinjima - Vulnerability, Resilience and Island Fluidity

the uplifted islands are studded with giant pumice that has been deposited on their surface. Also, Shinjima has near-surface marine sediments that contain fossil shells and has also clearly retained topographic fault features that occurred during its uplift. (Kobayashi et al., 2013).

In the present day, the island appears unchanged, but over time, Shinjima has shown much physical fluidity, appearing from the waters of Kagoshima Bay and changing form as a result of ongoing volcanic activity and environmental erosion.

Acknowledging the fluidity of an island's dimensions, with expansion and diminution shaped by environmental and anthropogenic processes (Johnson, 2020), Shinjima is one such island that has experienced rapid change in its size. Shinjima's circumference is thought to have been more than 4000m when it was formed, although due to erosion mostly caused by waves, by 1961 the island's circumference had reduced to 2157m, and in 1961 it was 1450m (Kadokawa Nihon Chimei Daijiten Hensan linkai, 1983, p. 918).⁸ In order to respond to this, Shinjima's foreshore has been strengthened with a seawall as a way of helping to prevent further natural erosion (Figures 3-4). This strengthening is in the form of large concrete blocks placed around the circumference of the island (sometimes with two layers with the outer one in the form of tetrapods with a few metres between the layers), thereby adding to the island's physical size. This form of eco-intervention shows a desire to protect the island's coastal area but build up its shoreline in the form of a distinct concrete barrier that is particularly visible and stands for a mode of intervention as part of the general sphere of island development.



Figure 4 – Seawall on Shinjima. (Photo by Henry Johnson, 2016.)

Amongst the anthropogenic influences on Shinjima, a small harbour was built to help facilitate travel, the construction of which included some land reclamation and extension of the island's physicality to several piers (Figures 3 and 5). Even though a relatively recent

⁸ On Shinjima's physical form, see Kadokawa Nihon Chimei Dai Jiten Hensan linkai (1983, p. 362) and Minami Nihon Shinbun-sha Kagoshima Dai Hyakkajiten Hensan-shitsu (1981).

island, anthropogenic impact on the island is widespread, including seawalls, harbour, housing, and a history of subsistence farming. The notion of fluidity in the context of such a relatively recent island underscores its dynamic physical landscape due to environmental and human interventions.



Figure 5 – Shinjima port with Sakurajima in background. (Photo by Sueo Kuwahara, 2022.)

Despite its small size, isolation and existence within a hazardous and active volcanic location, Shinjima has had a distinct history of settlement – as the only one of the An’ei Islands to be populated. Just two decades after the An’ei eruptions, as early as 1800, 24 people moved to Shinjima (Furusato Saisei Purojekuto no Kai, 2022). Shinjima’s small size allowed limited agricultural use of its land, although its island location was suitable for fishers, which was the main occupation of its residents (Sakurajima-chō Kyodoshi Hensan-iinkai, 1988, p. 413). Further, the island’s close proximity to Sakurajima provided a further location for Shinjima islanders to work.

Viewing the changes to Shinjima’s population within a paradigm of fluidity helps highlight the island’s societal shifts, which were a steadily changing feature that contributed to the island’s vulnerability in terms of not being able to sustain a social foundation. However, as a result of three main interventions, Shinjima has exhibited resilience and transformation, reflecting a contemporary vision for the island. These have been with Kagoshima City’s commitment to maintaining the island’s basic infrastructure; with the two current residents having a vision of cultural rejuvenation, environmental preservation and micro-tourism; and with a non-profit organisation (NPO – *Furusato Saisei Purojekuto no Kai* (‘Hometown Revitalisation Project Association’) helping to maintain some of the island’s natural

environment.⁹ Nevertheless, even these three points of leverage have inherent risk factors that contribute to the island’s vulnerability. For example, Kagoshima City might cease to maintain the island’s infrastructure, the senior couple may at some point move from the island, and the NPO can only be effective if it can maintain an interest amongst volunteers willing to help maintain the island. While each of these points is pertinent to understanding Shinjima’s vulnerabilities, in the present discussion focus is given to Shinjima’s two residents as cultural activists who are visible to the public and have attracted media attention with their vision for Shinjima.

Information on historical figures related to settlement is limited – but by 1951 (after around 150 years of settlement) there were 56 households in Shinjima with a population of about 250 (Kagoshima-shi, 2020, p. 4). The area that was mostly settled lies in the centre of the island, between two distinct elevated areas. However, from this time, the island’s population went into rapid decline:

Year	Population
1955	131
1960	85
1965	40
1970	26
1975	22
1990	18
1995	13
2000	12
2005	5
2010	4
2015	0

Table 1. Shinjima’s population, 1955–2015.
(Source: *Kōeki Zaidanhōjin Nihon Ritō Sentā*, 2018).

In this context of a dwindling population, Shinjima was totally depopulated in 2013 (Kagoshima-shi, 2020, p. 4). While the island’s abandonment was relatively short-lived, albeit, within a setting of still only having a minuscule settlement, the island was not totally forgotten in that aspects of its infrastructure continuing to be maintained by Kagoshima City and the NPO. For example, as well as the public utilities already mentioned, the City operates a small passenger boat for up to 12 passengers three times a day (taking 10 minutes), three times a week, and maintains a small community centre (*kōminkan*). The ongoing commitment to Shinjima by Kagoshima City relates more to the land, buildings and facilities

⁹ On the Shinjima revitalization project, see Furusato Saisei Purojekuto no Kai (2022).

Johnson & Kuwahara: Shinjima - Vulnerability, Resilience and Island Fluidity

owned by the City, rather than the non-resident owners of other plots or the two current residents.¹⁰

Because of Shinjima's proximity as an offshore island, in order to service its population with utilities, it has had to rely on the laying of pipes and cables for the supply of fresh water, electricity and telecommunications, which pass under the sea to Sakurajima, and are still in use. Prior to the installation of these utilities in the late 1970s, residents of the island had to depend on obtaining their own fresh water and managing a generator, albeit restricted to just a few hours daily. (N. Sasaki, personal communication, October 12, 2022).

While Shinjima's vulnerability stems from multiple sources, including the region's active volcanic environment, available resources and depopulation, such circumstances have actually influenced a remodelling of Shinjima's identity. As detailed in the following section, intervention in environmental, social and cultural spheres has helped establish a new identity for the small island, showing a resilience based on Shinjima's own terms.

Resilience

Within the Japanese archipelago, Shinjima is one of several similar small islands that depend on cultural activists to enhance island culture. For example, as reported in the *Japan News* in 2023, Mushima Island in Nagasaki Prefecture (Kyūshū) has a single senior activist:

Following his retirement, just over a decade ago, Umeo Koganemaru, now 74, returned to his depopulated hometown in hopes of helping revitalize the local community. Despite now being the island's only occupant, he vows to stay on as long as he can. (Kato, 2023)

On Shinjima, Naoyuki expresses a similar determination:

I plan to live in Shinjima as long as my body can move. If my body can't move, I would have to leave the island. We have always been thinking about who will protect the shrine and the island after us. (p.c., April 12, 2023).

In this context, if Shinjima is to continue its cultural rejuvenation and not suffer further volatility, those with an interest in its maintenance will need to ensure continued support from Kagoshima City, the island's NPO and island activists like Naoyuki and Kazuko.

Some other Japanese small islands have undergone comparable revitalisation as a result of population decline in the modern era and have also responded by reinventing their local cultural industries. These have been especially visible in the field of art tourism and enterprising "in-migrants" in the Seto Inland Sea (Qu, 2022; Zollet and Qu, 2019). Such approaches aim to instil new forms of uniqueness in the islands and bolster local economies. On Shinjima, however, while island activism is underpinning the island's rejuvenation, it differs from some of the "art islands" in the Seto Inland Sea in that public access to Shinjima is limited, the island has just two residents who rely on Kagoshima City and NPO assistance,

¹⁰ Kagoshima City owns 10,700 square metres of Shinjima's land over 11 plots, whereas private ownership covers 104,500 square metres over 175 plots (Kagoshima-shi, 2020, p. 4).

Johnson & Kuwahara: Shinjima - Vulnerability, Resilience and Island Fluidity

and tourism is restricted to a very small number of visitors (day trippers or up to six adults who stay at Naoyuki and Kazuko's guest house). Here, Shinjima exhibits a unique approach to island resilience, which is specific to the island and determined not only by its cultural and environmental setting, but especially because of the activism that has helped rejuvenate the island.

Shinjima's physical and social fluidity over a relatively short period has contributed to its appeal as a site of environmental and touristic interest. Further, the NPO for the island has been undertaking voluntary activities on Shinjima since 2014. Active in maintaining the island's natural, social and cultural environment, as it notes (in translation), the NPO's purpose is "to regenerate our hometown and preserve the environment, and use our hometown, rich in nature, as an educational resource for environmental education, social education, and training" (*Furusato Saisei Purojekuto no Kai*, 2022). A key member of the NPO is Kazuko's older sister, Hiroko (also born on Shinjima), who helped found the organisation as a result of the sisters' desire to maintain spiritual links to the island (Okuwaki, 2023). Such recognition of Shinjima across diverse areas of significance foregrounds the island's transformation from a small island locale with a community of islanders, to a place that has gone through a period of social decline that has re-emerged in a context where its environmental, social and cultural features serve as an educational resource.

Its re-population involves a type of stewardship of the island and not (currently), the formation of a larger island community. Just a few years after Shinjima's last resident left the island in 2013, Naoyuki and Kazuko moved to the island on a permanent basis in 2019.¹¹ Naoyuki and Kazuko, along with the NPO, are active in revitalising the island in several ways. They welcome visitors and take time to answer questions and offer guided tours. In 2020, they established a facility called Cafe New Island, complete with a rooftop terrace, and can accommodate up to six adults (Figure 6). In addition to tending to the island's natural habitat, maintaining pathways, and caring for the shrine, they constructed a swing on the island's highest hill, providing a panoramic view of Sakurajima. Within just a few years, Shinjima has undergone significant transformations¹². However, the island's accessibility is limited due to the small boat from Sakurajima and its associated travel times (Figure 7), exemplifying a case of micro-tourism with a distinctive niche market.

Japanese revitalisation projects reveal a vision for maintaining a deep connection to a particular place, culture or community, as expressed in the notion of *furusato* (hometown) (Robertson, 1989). In the Shinjima setting, *furusato* connects with the island and its rejuvenation in terms of "a political process by which culture, as a collectively constructed and shared system of symbols, customs and beliefs, is socially reproduced" (Robertson, 1989, p. 494). For Shinjima, this is evident through an emphasis given to island rejuvenation, environmental activism and micro-tourism, each promoted by the island's NPO. For Naoyuki and Kazuko, the notion of *furusato* is apparent in their deep engagement with Shinjima and in particular with the island's Shintō shrine, as discussed next.

¹¹ The couple note that visitors often enquire about moving to the island, so they refer them to the Kagoshima City Hall.

¹² For a summary of Shinjima in a touristic setting, see Kagoshima-ken Kankō Renmei (2022).



Figure 6 – Cafe New Island on Shinjima. (Photo by Henry Johnson, 2023.)



Figure 7 – Municipal boat at Uranomae Port on Sakurajima with Shinjima in the background. (Photo by Henry Johnson, 2016.)

The couple note that their primary reason for settling on Shinjima was to take care of the god of the island's Gosha Shrine (Figure 8), and that “with God’s power, we would like to play a role in protecting Sakurajima and the world” (N. Sasaki, p.c., April 12, 2023). Unlike

some small islands where there is an attraction to settle because of an idyllic setting or thriving economy, the “lure of the island” (Baldacchino, 2012), for Naoyuki and Kazuko was especially the shrine, which connects to Kazuko’s upbringing on Shinjima. Indeed, the couple’s dedication to Shinjima is expressed in Naoyuki’s comment that “the survival of this island is our purpose, one that my wife, God, our ancestors, and I share” (p.c., April 12, 2023). Such dedication and connection to the idea of *furusato* is evident in their explanation of what they do on the island, where the shrine frequently appears as the topic. For example, Naoyuki describes aspects of his daily life as follows:

I take care of a dog and chickens by about 7am, and then, after breakfast, I come to the shrine to change the water and recite a Shinto prayer. After that, I also worship the surrounding gods, such as the water god, tutelary god and so on. It takes more than one hour. After that, I do grass mowing, clean up fallen leaves and water the fields in the morning.

After lunch, I go to another road on the coast to clean up. My daily routine is mowing and cleaning almost every day. Driftwood enters the harbour as soon as there is a storm or flood. It takes months to burn and clean up the driftwood.

Thus, after working at the shrine and cleaning up in the morning, I continue to clean up in another place after lunch. I have dinner around 6 or 7pm. In the meantime, if there is a fishing customer, I go to a fishing place by boat to pick him up.

I try to relax for the night, but I have a lot to do. If there is a reservation for a fishing customer, I wake up at 5am. I go to bed at 10 or 11pm. I’m using a raft for anglers that is owned by a person from Uranomae [the closest port on Sakurajima]. He uses me to pick up and drop off fishing customers. It’s 3000 yen per person, but I split it with him. I’ll also do a cruise and Kazuko works as a sightseeing guide on the island, each for 3000 yen per person. She has the Tourist Guide qualification of Kagoshima City. Since we also do private lodgings [minshuku], there are many people who come to the island in the summer.

The most important thing that I do on the island is to protect the shrine. The festival of the shrine is held on 9 October, the annual Hoze Festival.¹³ The other important thing is the new year festival on 1 January. (N. Sasaki, p.c., October 12, 2022)

In this interview, Naoyuki outlines a typical daily routine. His focus on the island’s shrine shows a deeply ingrained spiritual side for the couple moving to the island. While it is his wife who was born on Shinjima, Naoyuki dedicates much time to the shrine, embracing his sense of islandness through Shintō belief and being influenced by Kazuko’s island roots on Shinjima. Naoyuki’s other activities concern his caring for the island and the micro-tourism involving fishers, sightseers and guests that have now become a part of the couple’s island lives. With such activities, there is a delicate balance between protecting the small island’s environment, while at the same time encouraging a small number of visitors to experience Shinjima’s unique history and setting. For the couple, the balance seems manageable due to

¹³ The term ‘hoze’ is a dialect word for ‘hōjō’ (‘fertility’), which is a festival to thank the gods for a good harvest during the autumn harvest season.

limited transport to and facilities on the island (there are no cars, but Naoyuki sometimes rides a small motor scooter with a trailer), thereby showing Shinjima as a distinct example where cultural rejuvenation, environment activism and micro-tourism meet within a sustainable framework and determined by the activities of the island's two residents.



Figure 8 – Gosha Shrine on Shinjima. (Photo by Henry Johnson, 2023.)

Within the context of island activism, the spiritual connection that binds the couple to Shinjima constitutes a fundamental factor influencing their choice to reside on the island. Their engagement in environmental activism and micro-tourism can be considered everyday initiatives that enhance their overall sense of island identity and dedication to living on the island. It is the couple's spiritual connection that stands out for their return to the island.

Linking to Japan's indigenous belief system, Shinjima's Gosha Shrine,¹⁴ has been revitalised as part of the couple's activities on the island. The shrine enshrines five deities: Tsukiyomi no Mikoto (the moon god), Ninigi no Mikoto (the great god), Hikohohodemi no Mikoto (the god of grain), Ugayafukiaezu no Mikoto (the god of agriculture), and Toyotamahiko no Mikoto (the god of the sea). While the shrine would have served islanders' religious needs during Shinjima's residential heyday, this spiritual place has taken on further meaning as a site of Shinjima's cultural heritage and pilgrimage for former islands. It also provides Naoyuki with significant spiritual inspiration. As he notes:

¹⁴ On Gosha Shrine, see Kagoshima Shrine Agency (<https://www.kagojinjacho.or.jp/shrine-search/area-kagoshima/鹿児島市/652/>).

Last Sunday, we had the Hoze Festival at the shrine and about 30 people came to attend. I invited the chief priest of the Tsukiyomi Shrine of Hakamagoshi of Sakurajima to hold the festival. Since we started living on the island, the chief priest told me to do the festival myself. I hold the festival once a year at the shrine, but I visit there every day. The shrine was crumbling, so Kazuko's father kept expressing until the end of his life that he wanted to rebuild it. To protect the nature of the island and rebuild the shrine, an NPO was launched to rebuild the shrine. Though the shrine was rebuilt, it's meaningless if I don't protect it. As I just reached retirement age, I decided to move to the island to protect the shrine. (p.c., October 12, 2022)

His remarks contribute to illustrating the significance of the shrine in Naoyuki's daily existence, predating his relocation to the island and serving as a spiritual symbol of Shinjima.

In Kita-Kyūshū [north Kyūshū], where we lived before we came to Shinjima, a strong-spirited woman was known for communicating messages from God. Kazuko's father happened to meet her and made a connection. After Kazuko's father passed away, we met her in Kita-Kyūshū. She said she could hear the voice of God. She told me that God wants us to live on Shinjima forever. (p.c., October 12, 2022)

It is with such a comment that the depth of the couple's spiritual belief and deep-rooted connection to Shinjima can be seen. The sense of *urusato* is clearly deeply engrained in Kazuko's and her family's island roots, which Naoyuki has embraced, and it is the island's shrine that has given an important focus for initiating Shinjima's cultural rejuvenation. Further, the shrine has also become an important attraction for visitors to the island, who are keen to receive an ink 'stamp' (print) in their stamp books that acknowledges their visit to a location viewed as an eco-spiritual "power spot" ("Sakurajima Shinjima 'goshajinja' ga atsui!, 2022").¹⁵

Small islands increasingly play a role in environmental activism, particularly through conservation and revitalisation projects (Trompf, 2018). This is especially part of Shinjima's new identity in the 21st century. During Shinjima's period of depopulation, both the island's natural habitat and man-made settings suffered neglect and decay (Figure 9). Most of the island is covered with giant *danchiku* (*Arundo donax*) reeds. The island also has a large variety of Japanese citrus and ferns, birds (e.g., Uchiyama Sennyuu, a rare species/summer migratory bird), feral cats, and black rats. The island's geology offers a unique insight into the geosite, including the upheaval of the seabed, shell fossil layers and algae beds (Kagoshima-shi, 2020, p. 4). The two current residents have pointed out that the island has recently gained more public interest, having appeared in the media, along with interest from Kagoshima City due to endangered wild birds that live on the island (N. Sasaki, p.c., October 12, 2022).

¹⁵ On such "power spots", see Hughes (2010).

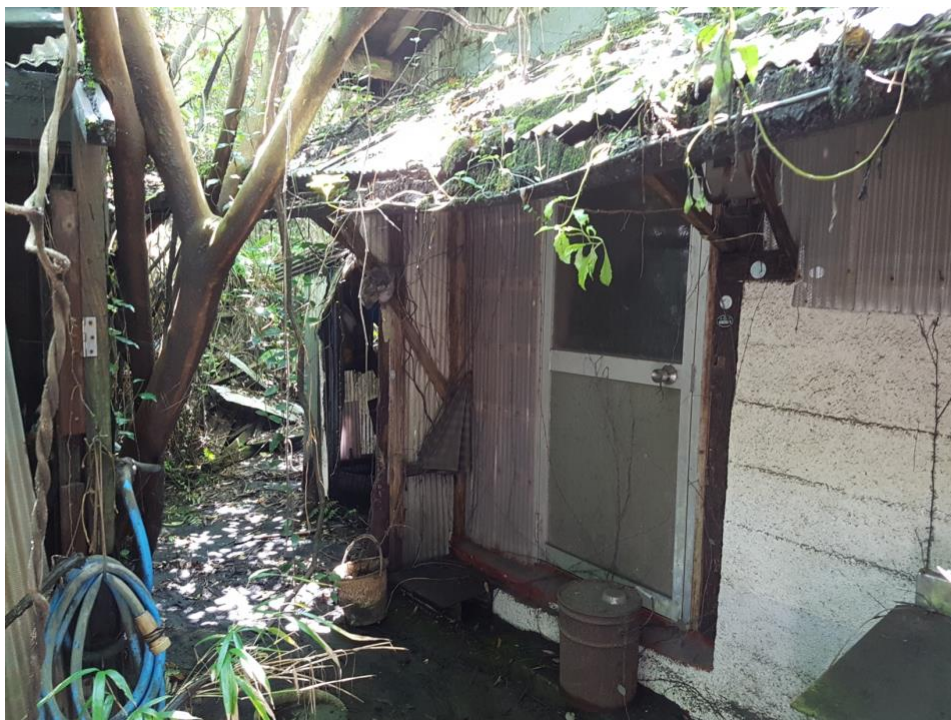


Figure 9 – Abandoned house on Shinjima (Photo by Henry Johnson, 2016).

Even though Shinjima had six years of no residential population, the island's main infrastructure has been maintained to the extent that it includes a well-constructed port on its Sakurajima-facing side, substantial seawalls protecting its perimeter, and a Community Hall. The island's upkeep is extended to other parts of its infrastructure, as outlined by Kagoshima City below (Kagoshima-shi, 2020, p. 2), which has a plan for maintaining the island within a set of conservational guidelines, including:

- Maintaining Shinjima as a place to experience the space of a remote island;
- Offering a place for learning about a geosite, the environment, and nature;
- Using the site of the branch school on the island for events and a plaza;
- Renovating the Community Centre with panel displays and information pamphlets;
- Providing walking routes and information boards about the island and its environment.

While the island's elementary school has since been demolished (Figure 10), each of the other points has been actioned, but also rely on the work of the NPO, Naoyuki and Kazuko. What is important with these points is that Kagoshima City is committed to maintaining aspects of the island within a paradigm of learning about its setting. For visitors, it is a site that has environmental education at its core, offering an island-based context that has unique features in the local area.



Figure 10 – Shinjima’s abandoned elementary school (photo by Henry Johnson, 2016), which was demolished in 2020.

Shinjima also has a particular status by being situated within the Sakurajima-Kinkowan Geopark.¹⁶ This site is branded to visitors in a number of ways that make much of the area’s volcanic activity and natural environment:

Sakurajima-Kinkowan Geopark has many Geo-Sites where you can play and learn about the land and its long volcanic history. Find out how the people have lived with the volcano by learning about the products and historical sites of the land related to the volcano. You can also enjoy exciting activities, tours, unique products and local meals. (Sakurajima-Kinkowan Geopark Promotion Council Office, 2022)

As a result of Sakurajima’s volcanic activity, which continues in the present, the area has attracted much interest not only from scientists but also in the area of volcanic tourism (Erfurt-Cooper, 2014). In this setting, on Sakurajima, the extent and dangers of volcanic tourism are noted by the protection offered to visitors:

The visitor centre is a reinforced concrete structure, built to withstand at least the average eruptions of the volcano, and offers a good selection of information for tourists about the volcanic history of the mountain, the local ecology and about disaster prevention measures. Many sightseeing spots can be found all over the island and these areas have concrete shelters constructed of reinforced cement walls with rounded roofs, all facing away from the volcano. Even public phones are surrounded by concrete to protect this important lifeline for emergencies. (Cooper, 2014, p. 245)

¹⁶ See Sakurajima-Kinkowan Geopark (<http://www.sakurajima-kinkowan-geo.jp/en/en-sakurajima-kinkowan/>).

Johnson & Kuwahara: Shinjima - Vulnerability, Resilience and Island Fluidity

The Kagoshima Tourism Federation is active in promoting Shinjima as a touristic site.¹⁷ In the context of highlighting aspects of Kagoshima Prefecture's heritage, trips to Shinjima are promoted. The island's recent re-settlement is stressed, along with the ease at which the island can be reached from Kagoshima Port. In the description of key facets of the island, several themes are expressed, including scenery, experiencing the island, sightseeing cruises, and Gosha Shrine. With such commentary, Shinjima is depicted as both a relatively remote island, yet it can be reached relatively easily by public transport (ferry, bus and boat).

There are various attractions in Shinjima. As the NPO shows on its map of the island, six key spots stand out that might be experienced: the Community Centre, the site of the former elementary school, the Gosha Shrine, the viewing point of Sakurajima, a shell fossil layer and Susaki Beach (Furusato Saisei Purojekuto no Kai, 2022). The Community Centre is at the small port and is a single-level concrete building that provides public toilets and acts as an evacuation centre. The elementary school was demolished in 2020 due to deterioration, but its history offers insight into the lives of school students on the island. Gosha Shrine was renovated in 2015 and is the island's focal point for Shintō belief. The shell fossil layer dates from the Jomon period (c. 10,000–300 BC) and is found about 30cm to 1m below the ground and visible on parts of the island's crags. The viewing point is at the highest peak, where Sakurajima can be viewed. Lastly, Susaki Beach was a popular site for islanders to hold sports events. Each of these attractions offers visitors an opportunity to experience important aspects of island culture and the natural environment considered distinct to Shinjima.

Situated near the port, Naoyuki and Kazuko's residence serves as their means of livelihood. The couple supplements their income by providing basic accommodation, offering guided tours, and organising sightseeing boat trips for visitors. Naoyuki also provides a water taxi, covering anything from a pick-up/drop-off service from Sakurajima or Kagoshima Port to a round-the-island trip. While Kazuko owns a deserted house and farmland on the island, her current house is owned by a former islander who has allowed Naoyuki and Kazuko to use it (while they plan to renovate Kazuko's property). The couple stress that because of their senior age, they are more interested in showcasing Shinjima rather than relying on an income from their activities there:

Currently, I am doing marine taxi work as much as I can. A person from Kagoshima City Hall asked me to operate a marine taxi. So, I got a boat license, applied for a marine taxi, and bought a motorboat. I have high hopes for a new kind of tourism that uses Shinjima. (N. Sasaki, personal communication, October 12, 2022)

...
When I get a call from a fishing customer around 6am, I go to Uranomae Port by my boat to pick him up. There is an administrative ferry on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays, three times a day, but it's at 8am, 10am and 3pm, which is too late for a fishing customer. If he uses my boat, he can come at his own time and load a lot of luggage, so he prefers to call me. (N. Sasaki, personal communication, October 12, 2022)

Naoyuki and Kazuko's life on Shinjima embodies a narrative that shows their commitment to the island, offering diverse micro-tourism services, and taking a grassroots approach to cultural preservation and environmental activism. As seniors, their focus on transmitting

¹⁷ On tourism to the island, see Kōeki Shadanhōjin Kagoshimaken Kankō Renmei (<https://www.kagoshima-kankou.com/feature/shimatabi/shinjima>).

the island's traditions to future generations reflects a dedication to intergenerational cultural exchange. Naoyuki's entrepreneurial spirit, particularly in establishing a marine taxi service, exemplifies an alternative tourism model, emphasising local autonomy and challenging traditional paradigms. Moreover, the couple's activities shed light on the challenges of small island life, navigating inconveniences such as limited transportation options. Together, their story encapsulates the intricate interplay of economic strategies, cultural resilience and the dynamics of preserving local identity in the face of demographic and economic shifts.

Conclusion

This article has contributed to Island Studies with a discussion of the small island of Shinjima and its island fluidity. The island has experienced vulnerability because of its volcanic setting, limited resources and abandonment, but there has been a context of resilience, expressed especially through the island's NPO and the interventions of the senior couple who have since 2019 made the island their home. As a result, Shinjima is today an icon of geocultural, social and cultural significance. Shinjima has undergone much change, which is characterised by physical, social and cultural fluidity. In the realm of environmental activism and micro-tourism discourse, Shinjima has gained recognition. While the island experienced a period of abandonment without a permanent resident population for six years, its current phase of regeneration aligns with a paradigm of environmental activism and niche tourism within an educational framework. The allure of Shinjima has evolved alongside its fluctuating population. The island's narrative, amidst ongoing volcanic activity, mirrors periods of vulnerability and resilience, shaped by fluctuating population dynamics moulding its identity. By employing the metaphor of fluidity, the article underscores Shinjima's continual changes across physical, social, and cultural domains. This evolution underscores Shinjima's adaptability and relevance, positioning it prominently within island studies as an example of an ever evolving and dynamic small island.

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