WHAT THE ISLAND TAUGHT ME:

Amami Ōshima, relational ethnography, and the slow education of a researcher

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ABSTRACT: On a Saturday afternoon in Naon village, Amami Ōshima in the south of the Japanese archipelago, a community group of older women bid me farewell with drums and singing. I had arrived as a researcher. I left understanding that I had been a guest, and that these are not the same thing. This article reflects on a decade of ethnographic engagement with Amami Ōshima and the surrounding archipelago, tracing how sustained encounter with these islands transformed not only my research practice but my understanding of what research is for, and what it owes to the places and people that make it possible. Drawing on narrative ethnography, auto-ethnographic reflection, and the frameworks of relational anthropology, sensory ethnography, and more-than-human theory, with particular attention to David Abram's ideas about sensorial reciprocity and the animate, communicative earth, the paper argues that Amami Ōshima was not merely a site in which research happened. It was an active relational teacher. Working through its people, its socio-cultural structures, its ecological intensity, and its non-human presences, the island enacted a transformation in the researcher's practice operating on three registers. Methodologically, the work shifted from extraction toward reciprocity. Ontologically, my attention expanded from the social-human world to the more-than-human islandscape in which human life is embedded. And in terms of scholarly voice, I moved gradually away from detached academic analysis toward narrative ethnography and auto-ethnographic reflection. This transformation was not the result of intellectual decisions but of relational accumulation, learnt slowly and with the particular patience that islands demand of those willing to be taught. Guesthood, defined as presence by permission, obligated by hospitality and accountable for the quality of the return, is advanced as the most methodologically honest account of the researcher's role in long-term island-embedded fieldwork.

KEYWORDS: Amami Ōshima, islandness, relational ethnography, auto-ethnography, narrative ethnography, island communicative ecologies, reciprocity

Opening

The drumming begins as we are preparing to leave.

We have spent the afternoon at the Shodansho café, which in Amamian translates as the "place for laughter and chatting," in Naon village on Amami Ōshima island. It occupies a converted shed in one of the narrow lanes of the village squeezed between mountain and sea, where senior community members gather over coffee and food, cooked from ingredients grown in the village and seasoned with the homemade chunky miso paste prepared by

Shigeno-san, who runs the volunteer team. (Figure 1). An academic paper on this community-led response to ageing has already been published (Papoutsaki and Kuwahara 2025), but what it has not fully captured is the moment when Motome-san, who is in her eighties and has been holding court for the better part of two hours, rises and takes up a small drum. The others follow her lead as if this is choreography they have rehearsed a thousand times, which, in a sense, they have, as part of the Amamian farewelling tradition. By the time my research collaborator, Kuwahara-san and I reach the door and walk out to the lane, we are accompanied by a stream of island sounds.

I am aware of a threshold I cannot locate; a line already crossed between observer and participant that I did not notice passing underfoot. I have been here before, on other islands, in other languages, in other registers of communal warmth. But this is different. In Papua New Guinea, more than two decades earlier, I understood for the first time that fieldwork was fundamentally relational, that the quality of what you come to know depends entirely on the quality of the relationships through which you come to know it. That was an intellectual understanding, arrived at quickly and with the shock of the new. What is happening in this lane in Naon village feels slower and harder to name. It has been accumulating over years in a typhoon-lashed apartment where the only evidence of the outside world was a disembodied voice from the neighbourhood loudspeaker, in old arcade cafés, in mud-dyed fabric pressed between my palms in a workshop, in ferry crossings, community meetings, and long unhurried evenings around island food in local *izakayas* (inns) with Amamians who had decided, at some point I cannot precisely identify, to let me stay a little longer.



Figure 1 – Motome-san to the left, another Naon Café participant in the middle and Shigeno-san to the right, outside the Naon Cafe (photo by author).

The drumming stops. Motome-san and Shigeno-san say something in the southern Amami Ōshima dialect that Kuwahara-san will translate for me later, but I understand it already, in the register that precedes language: Come back. I will.

That is what the island has been teaching me, all along, that research worth doing is research worth returning to, that the knowledge that matters most is the kind that takes years to earn, and that what you bring back is never only data. It is, if you are lucky, the beginning of a different way of knowing.

The island that teaches

Graham Harvey, writing on guesthood as an ethical and decolonising research method, argues that the researcher is always already embedded in a relational position going beyond the observer/observed binary, and that accepting the status of guest rather than claiming the authority of detached analyst would greatly enhance research and its outcomes (Harvey, 2003). For Harvey, working with Māori protocols for converting strangers into guests, guesthood implies vulnerability, accountability, and the possibility of refusal. Guests can be welcomed or turned away, and that contingency is itself epistemologically significant. I arrived in Amami Ōshima as a stranger. The question the island was always putting to me, though I did not understand it in these terms for some time, was whether I was becoming a guest and, if so, what kind.

John Sutton, whose work on situated affect and place memory opens this finale issue of *Shima*, makes a claim that seems almost obvious once it has been stated and yet difficult to fully inhabit. Human minds, he argues, are partly geographical or environmental in nature (Sutton, 2020). The processes by which we think, remember, decide, and feel are distributed across brain, body, and world, constituted as much by the environments we move through as by the neural architecture we carry with us. Place is not where knowing happens. It is partly what knowing is. Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledges adds to this when she argues for the radical partiality of all knowledge. Knowledge to her is always knowledge from somewhere, by someone, in relation to something. The years spent in learning to be a guest in Amami do not, in Haraway's terms, compromise scholarly rigour by becoming relational. The only knowledge available has been partial, embodied, and produced through connection. The auto-ethnographic voice of this article is thus an epistemological choice.

These insights have parallels in traditions that did not require Western epistemologies to arrive at them. In *te ao Māori* [1], the holistic, indigenous worldview centred on interconnectedness, the layering of self, place, and knowledge, *whakapapa*[2] in its broadest sense, is not a philosophical position but a cosmological starting point. That my own formation happened on an island, and that islands shaped what I was capable of knowing, would in this framework not be incidental to the research but rather its genealogy.

I have been thinking about this from Waiheke Island in the Hauraki Gulf of Aotearoa New Zealand, where I live and where much of my Amami writing is processed, revised, and returned to. The particular angle of winter light off the sea as you board the morning ferry to downtown Auckland, the Pohutukawa trees heralding summer at the Oneora beach, the Friday community lunches with island produce and rescued food, none of these is incidental

[1] *Te ao Māori* emphasises the profound relationship between humanity and the natural environment (*taiao*), recognising that all living and non-living things are bound together by genealogy and heritage (Spelman and Dieriks, 2025).

[2] *Whakapapa*, usually translated as genealogy, is the layering of one upon another, the understanding that identity is not a fixed point but a lineage, a set of relationships extending in all directions, including inward (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2021).

to the thinking. They are part of it. I did not fully understand this until Amami Ōshima taught me to notice it.

This article is a reflection on that education. Beginning with a 2017 Kagoshima University research fellowship and continuing through return visits before a 2025 Japan Foundation research fellowship allowed an immersive return, my engagement with Amami Ōshima and the wider archipelago has accumulated into a body of work on island communicative ecologies, ageing communities, ecocultural identity, community radio, more-than-human worlds, and the entanglements of nature, culture, and island governance under UNESCO world natural heritage designation (Papoutsaki and Kuwahara, 2018, 2021, 2024, 2025; Papoutsaki 2026).[3] But what I want to attend to here is not the findings but the formation. Not what I learnt about Amami, but what Amami taught me.

The argument I want to make might sound simple. Amami Ōshima was not merely a site in which research happened. It was a relational teacher. That teaching operated on three registers. Methodologically, it moved the research from extraction toward relational, slow, and reciprocal engagement; ontologically, it expanded ethnographic attention from the social-human world to the more-than-human islandscape in which human life is embedded; and in terms of scholarly voice, pushing me gradually, often uncomfortably, away from detached academic analysis toward narrative ethnography and auto-ethnographic reflection. None of these transformations resulted from intellectual decisions. They were taught to me, incrementally, by the island and its people.

This sequencing, field before framework, encounter before theory, is what Pugh (2018) refers to in his account of the relational turn in island studies, where knowledge emerges from relations rather than from frameworks applied in advance, and where there is no future of island studies in the singular, only futures plural. As a slow ethnographer, my relationship to island theory is more 'archaeological' than 'architectural'. The frameworks arrive after the field has already laid the foundation. I am essentially a cartographer who maps distinctive place-bound island spaces and what is held within: impressions, conversations with the island's humans and more than humans inhabitants, the humid air in typhoon season, the *Hachigatsu Odori* (August dance festival/八月踊り) and cruise ship arrivals among other things, while allowing serendipity to change the course of my work by following the island life (Rivoal and Salazar, 2013).

The Japanese philosophical tradition offers a concept that names the researcher's in-between position with precision. Watsuji Tetsurō's *aidagara* (間柄) (1996) (betweenness, or the in-between) describes selfhood as constituted not within individuals but in the relational space between them. The guest position, in this framework, is not temporary or marginal but an authentic description of human existence, since we are always already formed through the relationships that hold us. What Amami taught me about guesthood is, in Watsuji's terms, a lesson about the nature of self. To know the island is to be constituted by it.

[3] A decolonial framework that does not account for its own conditions of possibility lacks honesty, so a candid methodological note is warranted here. The virtues of slow ethnography are real, but so too is the structural privilege that underwrites them. The slow, reciprocal, return-based methodology advocated in this article was made possible by institutional fellowships, research funding, career flexibility, and a form of academic security unavailable to many researchers, particularly those in precarious positions, those from the Global South, or those whose domestic obligations preclude extended stays in the field.

Born into islandness: An archipelago of selves

I was born on Crete. I have not always known how to engage with this fact intellectually. But in retrospect, and retrospective perspective is the very mode this issue invites, it seems important. Crete is not a small island in the sense that the Amami Islands or Waiheke are small. Its mountains are genuinely alpine; its history carries the full weight of Mediterranean civilisation. And yet it is an island, and island life shaped me before I had a vocabulary for islandness. The rhythm of arrival and departure by boat, the particular way island communities manage the tension between the local and the mainland, the dense reciprocity of village relationships, these were not concepts I had to learn in graduate school. They were the atmosphere of childhood.

My own genetic composition is a "situated knowledge" in the most literal sense, partial, embodied, and historically positioned (Haraway, 1988). A DNA analysis produced results that were entirely predictable in retrospect. A rich composite of Venetian, Aegean, Ottoman, Byzantine, Arab, and Caucasian ancestry, reading as a living archive of all the forces that had passed through Crete across its history. Some stayed, most left. But all left their imprint, in the land, in the culture, and, it turns out, in the body. A small private lesson in what islands actually are. Not pure or bounded essences but, more often than not, a mixture of passing forces, some staying, some going, always leaving their mark.

When Pete Hay writes that islands are "paradigmatic places, topographies of meaning in which the qualities that construct place are dramatically distilled" (Hay, 2006, p. 31), I understand this not only conceptually but bodily. The novelist Jessica Andrews (2019), writing about her own experience of island belonging, captures something of this in *Saltwater* when she wonders whether in order to see the whole shape of a place you must leave and feel the contours of its edges. To leave means you can return, but not as the same person. I left Crete in 1987 and at some point, I reached the Pacific, and the research journey that eventually led me to Amami was, in ways I have only slowly come to understand, a journey back toward an islandness I had never fully left behind.

Papua New Guinea was the first of those subsequent encounters I would now name as professionally formative. I went there as a young researcher, carrying prepared interview questions, note-taking protocols, and analytical frameworks built for the purpose of producing legible academic knowledge. What the field produced instead was profound disorientation. Information moved through *wantok*/kinship networks rather than interview appointments, and the researcher's own position within the social field was not incidental but constitutive of what could be known (Thomas, Papoutsaki & Eggins, 2016). Papua New Guinea was my island researcher's birthing moment, the first place where I understood that research is done with people, and that the quality of the "with" determines the quality of the knowledge.

That understanding registered as a methodological revision rather than a deeper ontological shift. I did not yet understand that the field could teach you not just how to know but what kinds of things are knowable, that expanding research attention to include the more-than-human world, or transforming scholarly voice toward narrative reflection, were not methodological preferences but responses to specific field encounters that demanded them. That understanding waited for Amami.

The years between Papua New Guinea and Amami included long engagement with islands across the South Pacific, research, living, and teaching in contexts that deepened my

commitment to island studies as a distinct intellectual practice and my sense of islandness as a lived condition rather than merely a topographic category. Amami arrived not as a continuation of this experience but as its deepening, not novelty, since I already knew what island research felt like, but a relational invitation of different quality and demand. Abram's insistence that the sensuous world is "always local," meaning "the particular ground on which we walk, the air we breathe" (Abram, 2017, p. 266), makes most sense, for me, from an island vantage point. The sea that defines the boundary does not confine; it sharpens, making visible the distinction between where you are and everywhere else (Baldacchino, 2007).

The Island Host

The Amami chain sits at the southern edge of the Japanese archipelago, eight inhabited islands strung across roughly 200 kilometres of subtropical sea (Figure 2). Administratively they belong to Kagoshima Prefecture, yet anyone who has moved between Amami Ōshima, Kikaijima, Kakerojima, Tokunoshima, Okinoerabujima, and Yoronjima knows that the administrative label covers a great deal of internal difference. Each island carries its own dialect variants, its own social textures and its own sense of distance from the others. The combined population of approximately 110,000 is heavily concentrated in Naze, the main city on Amami Ōshima, but the outlying islands have their own rhythms and their own ways of being Amamian. Kuwahara (2016) describes this as a shift from "One Amami" to "Many Amamis," and the phrase captures something real about a shared regional consciousness that coexists, sometimes uneasily, with the insistence of each island on its own particularity.

The history behind that consciousness is long and layered. The islands moved through the Ryukyu Kingdom (1440–1609), Satsuma Domain (1609–1945), and eight years of US military administration before reversion to Japan in 1953, each period depositing its own sediment (Christy 1993). The Amami language, *Shimayumuta*, is now classified as critically endangered (Heinrich et al. 2015). *Shimauta*, the islands song tradition, communal and participatory, bound to labour and ceremony rather than performance is also shifting in focus with the arrival of tourism; *Ōshima tsumugi*, the handwoven silk textile carrying centuries of craft knowledge in its technique has substantially dropped its production (Horizon n.d). Language and cultural practices persist, though not without tension. UNESCO World Natural Heritage designation in 2021 brought international recognition and renewed pressure in the same moment, reinforcing local identity while accelerating the kind of tourism development that counter opposes the more-than-human image of the islands.

Demographically, the picture is challenging. Amami Ōshima's population has fallen by roughly half since its 1955 peak, shaped by decades of outmigration to mainland cities and an ageing population that exceeds national averages (National Census 2020). The knowledge held by older residents, in language, craft, agricultural practice, and oral tradition, does not transfer automatically; it requires time, proximity, and intention that outmigration tends to foreclose. The sugarcane fields that once anchored the local economy, along with the substantial contribution of *tsumugi* workshops, have contracted steadily. Tourism grew sharply after low-cost carrier services opened in 2014 and reached 580,000 annual visitors by 2019 (Kagoshima Prefecture 2020), though the structural costs of island life, high transport, thin markets, distance from supply chains, remain constants that shape what development here can realistically mean. It is within this context that my arrival to the island took place.

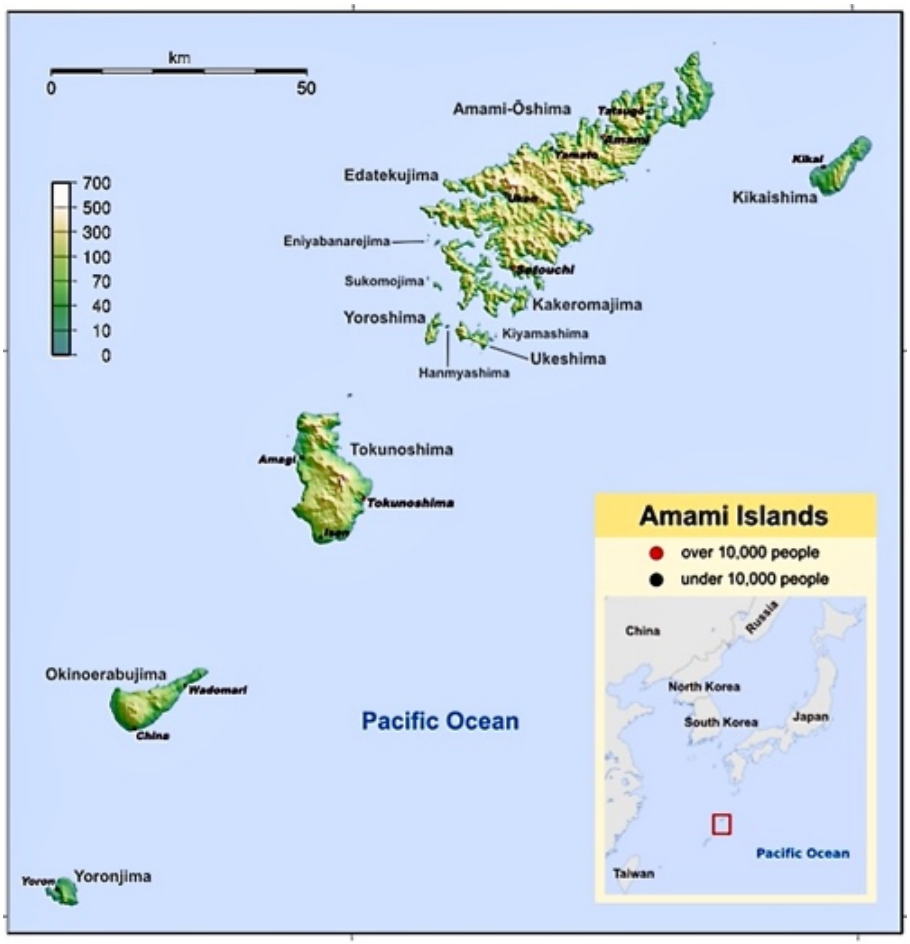

Figure 2 - Topographic map of the Amami Islands (Wikitravel file).

Arrival: Typhoon, collaboration, and the first lessons

My very first encounter with Amami Ōshima in 2017 was an act of elemental initiation. I landed on the island with the last flight from the mainland, just before a powerful July typhoon hit (Figure 3). Kuwahara-san[4], my host, knowing the unpredictability of such weather, did not waste time. After a brief stop at a Naze supermarket where I was urged to buy provisions for two days, I was taken to an apartment and instructed to stay inside until his return. For two days, the elements raged around me, the building battered on all sides, the wind carrying a register of sound I had not heard before, not storm-as-emergency but storm-as-address, the island announcing itself on its own terms, at its own pitch, to a

[4] The Japanese honorific suffix "-san" (さん) is a respectful title attached to a person's name. Culturally, "-san" does more than mark politeness. It also reflects awareness of social relations, mutual respect, and relational positioning within Japanese communication. Although the more formal honorific "-sensei" (先生), typically used for professors and teachers, would have been appropriate in this context, the use of "-san" instead indicates a less formal, more personal relationship.

newcomer who had not yet learnt to listen. The only evidence of the outside world was a disembodied voice periodically springing from a loudspeaker somewhere in the neighbourhood, making announcements I could not understand. I took it at the time for emergency broadcasting. Later, through fieldwork with my collaborator Kuwahara-san, I understood that the *Bōsai Musen* system (Figure 4) also performs an ordinary daily work, marking the island's time as well as sharing weather updates (Papoutsaki, 2017; Papoutsaki, 2023). The typhoon strips away the researcher's assumption of control over the field encounter. Before I had spoken to a single informant, collected a single datum, or opened a field notebook, the island had made its first pedagogical move. *You are here on my terms, not yours.*

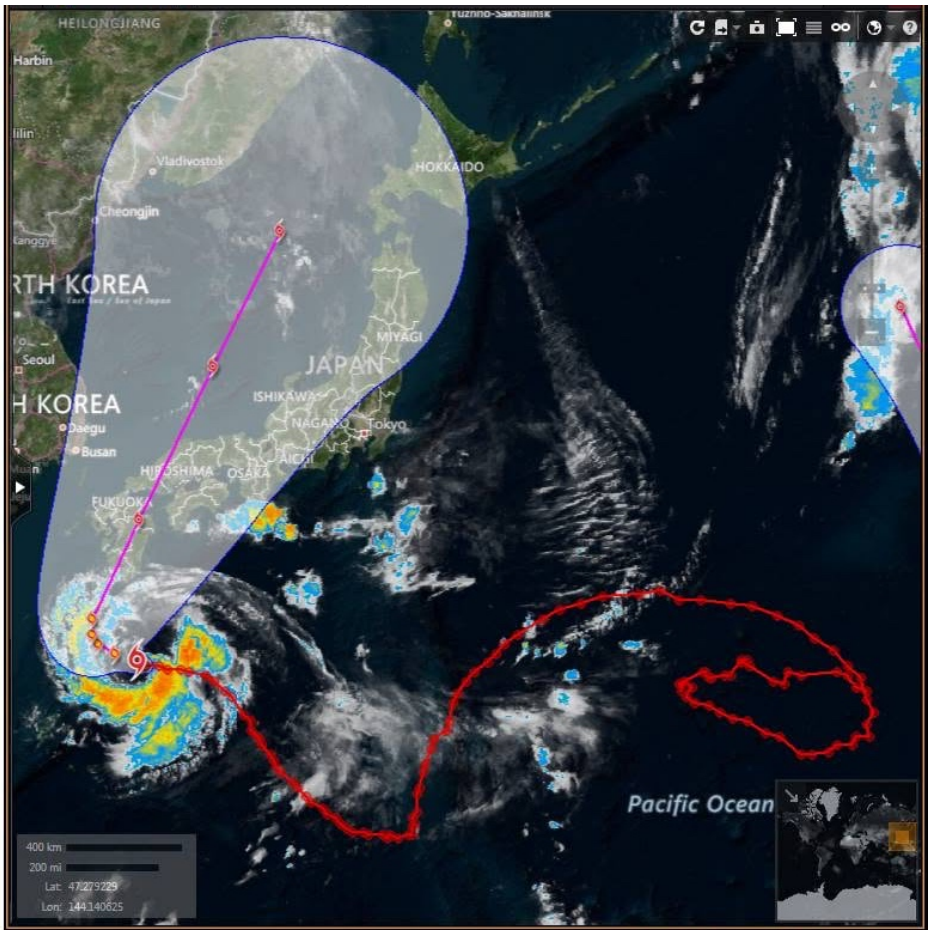

Figure 3 - The Amami islands in Typhoon Noru's path in 2017 (Thompson Reuters).



Figure 4 - A *Bōsai Musen* loudspeaker in Kikaijima (author's photo, 2017).

Papachristophorou (2025, p. 33) describes the arrival of the ethnographer in the field as "the beginning of an experience that cuts the researcher off from everyday life in various ways," in which "the introducing framework is crucial for what happens next." My own introducing framework was a typhoon. I had not chosen it; it had chosen me, and in doing so it settled, without my consent, the question of what kind of guest I would be. Not a visiting scholar in command of her itinerary, but someone who had arrived, needed shelter, needed guidance, and been given both by someone who knew the island's moods. Presence by grace, not by right.

One passage I have returned to many times since comes from David Abram, first read on the island itself during a later visit in the rainy season, when I was confined to my apartment by humidity and a brief blessed absence of internet, sitting on the balcony in Naze looking out over the port cocooned in a stifling mist. Abram writes of how our technologies "short-circuit the sensorial reciprocity between our breathing bodies and the bodily terrain," creating the illusion that we inhabit a purely human set of coordinates rather than the actual earthly place that physically sustains us. "We can know the needs of any particular region only by participating in its specificity, by becoming familiar with its cycles and styles, awake and attentive to its other inhabitants" (Abram, 2017, p. 268). The typhoon of my first Amami arrival had made that participation non-negotiable. Cut off from every substitute, I had nothing left to do but listen to what the island was actually doing.

My initial arrival was facilitated by the Center for Pacific Islands Research at Kagoshima University, which provided not only office space and accommodation but, most importantly, a collaboration with Professor Sueo Kuwahara as my research host. His standing as an Amamian scholar who grew up in these islands extends well beyond his role as cultural

bridge. As a published anthropologist with his own intellectual history and his own theoretical account of the islands, which includes two important co-edited multidisciplinary volumes (Kawai, Terada and Kuwahara, 2013; Takamiya, Kawai and Kuwahara, 2016), he has done more than any other single scholar to establish interdisciplinary Amami studies, without which the present research would have had nowhere to stand.

Moving through the Amami Islands with Kuwahara-san was ontologically different. He could hear the social, historical, and dialectal layers of meaning that I would have needed years to detect. His identity as an Amamian communicated something that no methodology could produce, that this research was not being extracted from the islands by an outsider but was in some measure being tended by someone who belonged to them. I use "tended" deliberately. The word implies care, return, and responsibility, a relationship with knowledge that is more like stewardship than ownership. It was not a word I would have reached for at the start of the 2017 fellowship. By its end, it was the only one that felt accurate.

Another candid methodological note is needed here. I do not speak the Amami dialect and my Japanese is elementary. Many verbal encounters described in this article were mediated through Kuwahara-san, with the necessary cultural context in the background, or in some cases through a local intermediary. Holmes (2016, p. 92) argues that researchers must "balance their own assumptions, worldview and contextual knowledge knowledge—their *interculturality* —with the social, cultural, political and institutional context of the research," and the presence of a trusted Amamian interlocutor is, on this account, not a workaround but a form of methodological honesty. I am mindful that this article argues for slowness, reciprocity, and embodied presence with considerable care that needs also to account for what this layer of mediation means for its knowledge claims. What was lost in translation, or gained through it? How does the interpreter's own relationship to a speaker or community inflect what I, the researcher, come to hear? I cannot claim I have resolved these limitations. And yet I believe that Kuwahara's linguistic and cultural intervention is a sign of strength, that the island speaks to me through its own presentative.

The fieldwork took us across Amami Ōshima, Kikaijima, Tokunoshima, Okinoerabu and Yoronjima, five of the islands in the Amami archipelago. The research brief was clear enough in its stated aims, to map aspects of the communicative ecology of the islands. But the research itself, as ethnographic research always does, began to teach me something different from what I had arrived prepared to learn. The first of those lessons arrived in a kitchen in Kikaijima, at a dinner with our local host and old schoolfriend of Kuwahara-san, interrupted by a voice from the wall that turned out to be the *Bōsai Musen* system marking the end of another island day. I had not come to Kikaijima to study *Bōsai Musen*. But this is how Amami works. It offers you things you were not looking for, through relationships you had not planned for, at moments you did not anticipate (Papoutsaki and Kuwahara, 2024).

When I returned to Amami Ōshima in 2025 for my Japan Foundation research fellowship, Kuwahara-san met me at the airport with the greeting that had come to feel entirely natural. "Welcome home," he said (Papoutsaki, 2025a). It is a greeting every returning researcher hopes to earn.



Figure 5 - The slow ethnographer's handwritten *Tanabata tanzaku* (七夕短冊) festival wish: "I wish I can stay longer in Amami", Naze Arcade, 2017 (author's photo).

What Slowness Knows

Returning to Amami does not feel like returning to a research site. It feels like returning to a community that has been continuing its life in your absence, that registers your return with varying degrees of warmth depending on how much of yourself you left behind on previous visits, and that offers you, in proportion to that registration, access to layers of understanding unavailable on first encounter.

The 2022–2023 return, after a break enforced by the pandemic, began in an unexpected way. When a painting (my portrait) arrived at my Waiheke address from an artist friend in Toen village, it felt like the island's way of saying it was time. The gift was both a gesture of ongoing relationship and a summons (Papoutsaki, 2023). He is the kind of island figure who resists all categorisation, part philosopher, part cowboy at his own admission, the man I once described as "Amami's Zorba the Buddha" (Papoutsaki, 2024a), who had left the bowing hierarchies of mainland Japan because, as he put it with characteristic directness, here, on the island, he did not have to bow to anyone.

The *Shodansho* café in Naon village revealed itself differently on a second visit, and differently again on a third. By the third visit, I understood that Shigeno-san's island homemade chunky miso paste gift to our gift of the published article copy was not a domestic detail but a statement of philosophy. Here, the island feeds its people with what the island grows, and the people who tend the gathering are enacting *yui*, the Amamian principle of reciprocal labour. *Yui* is rooted in Amami's bilateral kinship structure, what Kuwahara (2013) cites as *haroji*, in which reciprocal obligations circulate equally across kin lines, without the hierarchical patrilineal emphasis of mainland Japanese society. Labour lends itself and returns to its source. When the women of Naon cafe rise to drum us farewell, they are enacting this deep social architecture, one where the stranger, once received, has entered the network of mutual obligation.

A different kind of slowness lesson arrives, reliably, every time Kuwahara-san and I drive across the island together. At some point in the journey, he gestures toward a hillside or coastal stretch and says that they're building another tunnel. And I respond, almost by reflex: what, another one, why? Aren't 46 tunnels enough? The exchange has become a ritual, a shorthand for the ongoing tension between the infrastructure-as-care logic applied by mainland intervention to remote Japanese islands and the ecological and community values that Amami's own activists, ecologists, and community petitions consistently articulate (Papoutsaki, 2025c; Kuwahara, 2012). It is the kind of running conversation that only years of repeated return visits make possible, communicating in ellipsis because enough shared context has been built to make the shorthand legible.

The hospitality with which the island receives returning researchers may have deeper cultural roots than the sociology of guesthood alone can explain. Kuwahara (2013) notes that the Amamian and wider Ryukyuan cosmological tradition of *niraikanai*, the belief in a paradise across the sea from which sacred visitors and good fortune arrive, may partially account for what he describes as Amamians' tendency to welcome and show great hospitality to visitors from afar. If the stranger who arrives by sea or air carries an echo of the sacred visitor from beyond the horizon, then the researcher's reception in Amami is threaded into a cosmological grammar of welcome and return that long predates any contemporary notion of fieldwork ethics.

I first walked into Harahabuya, the Hara family's *habu* (snake) shop in Naze's *shotengai*/arcade, largely by accident, drawn by a rack of snakeskin wallets visible through the doorway. What I found inside was not a souvenir shop but something stranger and more layered, "between a gift shop, a gallery, a philosophical salon, and an archive" (Papoutsaki, 2026b), with a timeline of habu legislation from 1948 on one wall. Behind the counter was the older son of a family engaging with Amami's famous venomous snake (*habu*) for three generations. The most important thing a *habu* shop must do, he told me, is not sell *habu* products but make people aware of *habu*. Not manage the snake but understand it. He designs stickers that give visitors the scientific name of a species in three scripts, with no further caption. "If I write the whole explanation there, it'll end. But if I give them the name and let them search for themselves, they learn it" (Papoutsaki, 2026b). This, I recognised, is a precise description of what the best island fieldwork does. You do not give the explanation. You put the elements together and see what meaning emerges.

Kanai Yukihito, the mud-dyer based near Tatsugo Town, distils a parallel philosophy into a single instruction for island visitors that invites them to follow people. If you follow the people of Amami, you will naturally arrive at many places, and that process itself becomes

the interesting journey (Papoutsaki and Clenney, 2026). I have been following that advice, unknowingly, since my first Kikaijima dinner.

Harvey's (2003) account of Māori protocols for converting strangers into guests holds open the possibility of refusal, strangers may not be welcomed if their conduct does not warrant it, and this contingency is the ethical core of guesthood as methodology. Sipahi's (2024) concept of "hospitality assemblages" names the ongoing, imperfect, other-oriented work through which guest-host relationships are built and maintained over time. Fieldwork is not a sequence of achieved milestones. It is a sustained effort to remain worthy of the hospitality extended. Desmond's (2014) concept of relational ethnography, the field understood not as a bounded site but as a social relationship that must be constituted, maintained, and honoured, describes the same commitment from within the sociological tradition. I encountered Desmond's framework after the field had already taught me its content. The theory arrived as confirmation of an experience rather than as a guide to one. This sequencing matters. The field educates first, and the concepts arrive as recognition.

Bishop's (2005) *Kaupapa Māori* framework articulates a parallel principle where decolonising research requires not merely better methods but a fundamental redistribution of epistemic authority, from the researcher who arrives with questions to the community that has been living the answers. Wilson (2008, p. 135) names the ceremonial dimension of this commitment, "[i]f research doesn't change you as a person, then you haven't done right." The years of Amami fieldwork changed me, the researcher, in ways that cannot be reduced to methodological revision. They changed what I understood knowledge to be, and what I felt I owed.The *manaakitanga* parallel is impossible to miss for a Waiheke/Aotearoa-based researcher. This Māori practice of hospitality understood as the mutual enhancement of dignity reflects precisely what the Naon village women enact in the drumming farewell. They are not simply seeing the researcher off; they are conferring status, recognition, the formal marking of belonging, that changes what the researcher is in relation to the community. In both frameworks, the exchange between host and guest is not transactional but transformative. Both parties are changed by the quality of the encounter, and the obligation generated does not dissolve when the encounter ends.

Slowness, I have come to believe, is the condition of access to the second and third layer of things, meanings only available to those who have demonstrated their intention to remain. The *Shodansho* paper (Papoutsaki and Kuwahara, 2025) took years to move from field observation to published argument, not because the material was insufficient but because something in the ongoing relationship with the Naon village café insisted the story was not yet complete. We held back, and when we finally published, a new chapter of the café's life had become visible, one that showed the community's capacity to adjust to changing circumstances without losing what it was. Hayward's (2005) Culturally Engaged Research and Facilitation (CERF) framework, proposed at the first SICRI conference at Kagoshima University in 2005, articulates a model of island community research that the present article independently enacts. Academic articles are "one component of a series of collaborative activities," and the researcher's obligations to island communities include returning produced materials and assisting the circulation of cultural work by local producers. That this practice was arrived at through field experience rather than prior acquaintance with the framework is itself consistent with the article's sequencing argument.

Learning to hear the *shima*/island: Amami, Abram, and the more-than-human world

My understanding of what ethnographic attention should include underwent its most significant expansion through work with Futoshi Hamada in Akina Village, in the northern part of Amami Ōshima. Hamada is the island's celebrated photographer and ecologist whose *Mura* (Village) project spent the better part of two decades documenting and taking part in the rice cultivation cycle and of the *Shochogama* and *Hirasemankai* harvest festivals of what is now one of the last communities in Amami Ōshima still actively practicing both (Hamada, 2001, 2026). When the rice is planted, the egrets arrive, as they always do, because the plowing brings insects to the surface. The grey-faced buzzards come later, in February, to the resting paddy fields, for the same reason. These birds are not incidental visitors to Akina's agricultural calendar. They are participants in it. The paddy field, according to Hamada, "is a contact zone between nature and humans. The village itself is also a contact zone of nature and humans. Insects and wild birds often become protagonists. The interesting part of the village is that it gives them a place to take turns in their leading role" (Hamada, cited in Papoutsaki and Kuwahara, 2021, p. 34). This awakes memories of seasonal farming work on another island, the Crete of my childhood, before EU subsidies and intensive agriculture depleted the island flora and fauna. Reading the phrase in my field notes, I circle "take turns in their leading role" and write beside it a single question, "*What would it mean to take this seriously?*"

The answer required a fundamental revision of the conceptual framework I had been working within. The Island Communicative Ecology model I had been developing used "ecology" primarily as a methodological metaphor. When I encountered Hamada's ecocultural practice, his eventual decision to cultivate rice himself because he came to feel guilty that he was the only one not covered with mud (Hamada, 2001), I recognised that the metaphor was insufficient. The ecology was the actual condition within which communication, identity, and community life in Amami were embedded (Papoutsaki & Kuwahara, 2021). I find the parallel with Kanai Yukihito's practice striking as he argues that natural dyeing is only possible because of the natural environment, "[t]hat's why I always feel like I am being allowed to dye, rather than simply doing it myself" (Papoutsaki and Clenney, 2026). Both the farmer and the dyer describe a relationship with the non-human world that is not mastery but participation, arrived at not through theory but through the long, muddy experience of doing.

It was through this recognition that I found my way to David Abram's work, specifically to *The Spell of the Sensuous* (2017). "Communicative meaning," he writes, "is always, in its depths, affective; it remains rooted in the sensual dimension of experience, born of the body's native capacity to resonate with other bodies and with the landscape as a whole" (Abram 2017, pp. 74-75). Reading this passage while in Amami, I understood for the first time why the book had always felt different on an island than anywhere else. The argument was not abstract when I sat inside warm rainy-season air, listening to rain touching the sea in the port of Naze, watching heavy mist cover the surrounding hills. The text was describing my immediate perceptual situation, not a theoretical proposition about it.

The more-than-human world of Amami reaches well beyond its celebrated biodiversity. The *kenmun*, sprite-like forest spirits said in Amamian folk belief to inhabit ancient trees and waterways, mark boundaries between the human and the sacred that no UNESCO management plan has found a way to administer. What guides and local cultural actors have

come to understand, and sometimes communicate to visitors through, the *kenmun* figure itself, is a form of cultural technology for respect. "That place is *kenmun* territory, so be careful," a guide might say, not as superstition but as boundary wisdom, a culturally grounded means of teaching visitors where to slow down, where not everything belongs to human access (Papoutsaki 2026a). The *kenmun* belongs to the animistic sensibility that underlies both Amamian folk belief and the mainland Japanese Shinto understanding of place, in which the sacred emerges through long-term relationships between communities and specific landscapes. When Hamada photographs the egrets moving through the rice rows, he is documenting not a nature scene but a relational event, the community's seasonal co-participation with its more-than-human neighbours, understood as a form of ritual acknowledgement.

The *habu*/snake occupies a similarly complex position in this more-than-human geography. *Protobothrops flavoviridis*, the Okinawa *habu*, is found only in the Ryukyu Islands. An apex predator essential to the rodent population dynamics that maintain the island ecosystem, it is also venomous, nocturnal, and present in precisely the zones where human settlement meets forest, namely stone walls, old tombs, the edges of villages. For generations, Amami municipalities paid bounties on *habu*. In 1979, the Japanese government introduced thirty small Indian mongooses to eradicate them. The logic appeared straightforward since the mongoose is famously immune to pit viper venom. The result was a disaster. The mongoose is diurnal while the *habu* is nocturnal. Freed from predation and competition, the mongoose population exploded to roughly 10,000 individuals, preying not on habu but on the island's most vulnerable native fauna, critically the Amami rabbit, found nowhere else on earth. It took more than four decades of systematic trapping and expenditure exceeding twenty-three million US dollars to undo the damage. In 2024, Japan's Ministry of the Environment finally declared Amami Ōshima mongoose-free, the first successful eradication of this scale anywhere in the world. As Takeomi Hara observed from behind the Harahabuya shop counter, this is a story of human intervention in nature writ large, well-intentioned, ecologically naive, and extraordinarily expensive to reverse (Papoutsaki, 2026b). The *habu*, cast for decades as the villain, survived it (Figure 6).



Figure 6 - *Habu* skins on displace at the Harahabuya Casari shop's showroom (source: author)

A custodian of Amamian island cuisine and the local *Yuta* (Ryukyuan shaman) historian shared with me over lunch video footage from a recent initiation of a new *Yuta* at a sacred waterfall. Her account was not a folklore report. It was an account of the island's communicative world as it actually operates, a world in which the land, its waters, its non-human inhabitants, and its ancestral dimensions are all active participants in the life of the community (Papoutsaki, 2025a). Amamian cosmology does not need Western phenomenology to justify itself. Abram and the frameworks of ecocultural identity theory are complementary lenses, brought with me as a guest in an attempt to hold a conversation with the island as my host. Amamian spiritual practices — the *Noro* priestesses of the indigenous Ryukyuan religious tradition, the cosmological status of the *habu*, the *Yuta*'s account of the relationship between the living and the ancestral landscape — constitute an independent theoretical framework for more-than-human relations, with its own internal logic, epistemological claims, and modes of validation (Figure 7).

The island's cosmology describes a world that is communicative, relational, and constituted by living presences that include the human but exceed it. *Te ao Māori* offers a precise vocabulary here. The concept of *mauri*, the life force or vitality inherent in all things, animate and apparently inanimate, describes exactly the property of the Amami landscape that this article is trying to hold. The sense that the forest, the paddy field, the tidal shoreline, the *habu's* territory are not passive backdrop but active presences with their own integrity. The concept of *kaitiakitanga*, guardianship of the natural world as a relational obligation, maps directly onto the ecocultural ethics that Hamada's photography, Kanai's mud-dyeing, and the Amami eco-guide community collectively enact.



Figure 7 - Amami relational ontology on a locally *Shima no Cotachi* designed T-Shirt (author's photo).

During my 2025 fellowship, I participated in an indigo and mud-dyeing workshop led by Yukihito Kanai. The process of *Ōshima tsumugi* mud-dyeing is laborious and layered in ways that resist short description. The silk is dyed in a bath of tannin extracted from the native *sharinbai* plant, then immersed in iron-rich paddy mud formed over 1.5 million years of geological time, the tannins reacting with the iron to produce colours that cannot be chemically replicated because the environment is always changing:

> *No two dyeing sessions produce exactly the same colour. The same process, done side by side by two different people, yields subtly different results. That is not a flaw to be engineered out. It is the very nature of the thing.* (Papoutsaki and Clenney, 2026).

Standing with my hands in that mud, literally stained by the island's earth, I understood what he meant about being "allowed to dye" rather than doing it. The island was not passive material in my hands. I was a temporary variable in its much longer process. The mud on my palms is not a symbol of this encounter. It is the encounter itself.



Figure 8 - *Tsumugi* fabric patterns corresponding to their Amami islands unique fauna inspiration that earned their UNESCO World Natural Heritage Designation.

Watsuji's (1988) concept of *fūdo* (風土), the climatic and environmental world that constitutes human community, provides a specifically Japanese theoretical vocabulary for what this article has been describing as island communicative ecology. The *Bōsai Musen* system, which emerged in response to typhoon risk and now marks the island day, is a cultural product of *fūdo* in Watsuji's sense. The same can be said of the lunar calendar that governs the Akina harvest festivals, and the seasonal attunement through which *shima uta* (island songs) has historically carried the emotional register of agricultural and maritime life. Communicative ecology and *fūdo* describe the same phenomenon from different disciplinary traditions, the inseparability of environment, communication, and community.

UNESCO world natural heritage designation has intensified the pressures that these ecocultural practices must navigate. Plans for a twelve-story high-rise hotel adjacent to a national park catalysed intense community opposition, gathering over 45,000 signatures on a Change.org petition. A subsequent village petition from Ashitoku was more direct:

> *Being registered as a World Natural Heritage site is a great source of pride for us. However, areas outside the designated zone remain insufficiently protected and are being exposed to waves of development under the name of 'tourism.' If things continue as they are, Amami's nature, recognised by the world, will be steadily reshaped by outside capital, and irreplaceable landscapes will be lost one after another.*

Tsuneda Mamoru, the pioneering environmental activist and founding member of the Amami Wild Bird Society, named the dynamic plainly, "UNESCO is a double-edged sword, it can save the island or accelerate its destruction if mismanaged" (Papoutsaki, 2026, p.10). One island tourism agent during my 2025 fieldwork described what they called "psychological overtourism," pointing to how it is not visitor numbers alone that displace community but the perceptual transformation that occurs when enough observing strangers accumulate that residents begin to experience their homes as attractions and their daily routines as spectacles (Papoutsaki, 2026). The carrying capacity of an island community is not only ecological. It includes this social and perceptual threshold.

Abram's phenomenology of the animate landscape offers the deepest account of what is ultimately at stake. When the island is reduced to spectacle, the reciprocal perceptual relationships through which a community remains genuinely oriented in its place are severed. This is not merely cultural loss. It is an epistemological severing, the destruction of a way of knowing rooted in bodily presence and seasonal attentiveness. The eco-tour guides of Amami play a structurally analogous role to the craftspeople, facilitating visitors' entry into sensory participation with the landscape, teaching them to hear the silence of the forest, read animal traces, feel the meaning of humidity, and respect the pace at which an animate landscape reveals itself. A guide is not simply someone who provides facts. A guide is someone who helps form a relationship between visitors and the living landscape. These are acts of translation. Abram would call this the recovery of sensory reciprocity, the practiced attentiveness through which a community remains genuinely oriented in its place.

The island's voice and the researcher's page

There is a particular moment in the process of writing the Akina photo essay with Kuwahara-san, that I keep returning to. It is the moment when I realised that the piece we were producing could not be a conventional academic article. It was a hybrid space, half article, half visual essay, that had emerged from the encounter with Hamada's images and resisted resolution into either form (Papoutsaki and Kuwahara, 2021). I experienced this resistance as discomfort. The conventions of academic writing, deeply internalised over decades of training and publication, pull toward a particular kind of clarity where arguments are stated, evidence adduced, conclusions drawn. Hamada's *Mura* work was producing something that did not resolve in that direction (Figure 9). It insisted on the photograph's own communicative authority, on the image as a form of knowing that did not need to be translated into propositional language to be valid. Our academic prose was not interpreting the photographs so much as accompanying them, providing context without claiming priority.



Figure 9 – Futoshi Hamada with the author, holding Hamada's Mura new children's book featuring Amami's back rabbit as the protagonist and his famous 1991 Amami forest *Kinsakubaru* poster (Naze, 2025)

Our collaboration extended into public-facing work. We became part of the editorial team behind *Amami Horizon* (https://amami-horizon.com/en/), the online version of the magazine dedicated to the archipelago, contributing research-informed writing and interviews to a platform whose purpose is precisely the kind of relational knowledge-sharing that academic publications can only partially achieve.

Cohen's (1988) distinction between "contrived" authenticity, commercial fabrication designed to satisfy tourist expectations, and "emergent" authenticity, community-driven adaptation that generates new but genuinely rooted cultural meaning, proved essential for understanding what is at stake when the island's traditions are pressured by heritage tourism. The *tsumugi* craftspeople incorporating traditional mud-dyed patterns into bath tiles and coasters exemplify emergent authenticity; the curated "vintage" stalls in the Naze arcade that appeared during cruise ship arrivals, selling old kimonos to tourists wandering past the actual living craft, exemplify the contrived. What distinguishes them is not aesthetic purity, but who controls the terms of cultural representation. Kanai's formulation of this distinction is more precise than Cohen's. "Tradition is often fixated on form, but I think the essence lies in the spirit that created that form. If that spirit remains reflected, then allowing new forms to emerge is actually an interesting moment" (Papoutsaki and Clenney, 2026).

Nowhere is this distinction more urgent than around *shimauta* itself. Amami FM staff articulated the community's position precisely: "We don't want professional singers, *shimauta* is about life, not performance. People sing together and dance together; the inside and outside are not divided" (Papoutsaki, 2026). Traditional *shimauta* is embodied practice, song that emerged from agricultural labour, navigational knowledge, and seasonal attunement. To stage it for tourist audiences is to sever the reciprocal relationships through which it carries meaning, a transformation from a culture of voice into a culture of

spectatorship. What was once a living voice of everyday life risks becoming a packaged cultural product.

The turn toward narrative ethnography, and toward the auto-ethnographic voice I am using in this article, was a longer process. Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue that evocative auto-ethnographic writing is an extension of scholarly rigour rather than a retreat from it. Behar is more direct when arguing that the anthropologist who pretends to observe without being observed produces "a kind of lie by omission" (1996, p. 5). Haraway provides the epistemological frame for this argument when stating that:

> *The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and* therefore *able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another.* (1988, p. 586)

The hybrid form of the Akina photo essay was an expression of precisely this, a form of knowing that acknowledged its own incompleteness and offered that incompleteness as a condition of genuine encounter.

What Amami taught me about writing was simple and irreversible. The form of knowledge must honour the form of its source. Research produced through relationships must be presented in a register that carries the weight of those relationships. Research shaped by the more-than-human world must allow that world a voice in its own telling.

The obligation to return

The year 2024 brought a threshold that no research design had anticipated. Just before my fieldwork on the island, my father passed away in Crete. I had not been able to reach him in time to say goodbye and had missed the funeral, held the day after his death according to Greek Orthodox tradition. In those days of private grief, the island's spiritual traditions made space for it.

Through a local expert on *Yuta*, the female shamans of the Ryukyu Islands who carry forward an animistic tradition that has survived centuries of cultural disruption, I was brought to a renowned practitioner in Naze. This encounter was not part of my fieldwork. It arose from a private moment of grief, made possible by years of relationship with the island's community, and it is included here not as research data but as a record of what long-term relational presence can open. The Yuta practitioner is not named, and no claim is made about her understanding of how this meeting might eventually be read. The ethical questions raised by writing about sacred encounters in small communities, questions of consent, of what belonging to a community entitles a guest to share, of the line between fieldwork and everyday life, are real and significant. They deserve fuller treatment than this article can give them and I have addressed the most pressing of them by limiting the account to what it most directly demonstrates, namely that a community can come to hold a researcher in ways that exceed the categories of the research relationship itself. For that reason, the encounter is described here as a personal threshold rather than an analytical case.

We climbed through narrow alleys to a third-floor room dominated by a large altar surrounded by dozens of *shochu*[5] bottles. The *Yuta* herself appeared unremarkable at first glance, a woman in her early seventies wearing a white *yukata*. She looked like any grandmother. After receiving the customary *shochu* and envelope with my offering, she turned to the altar, lit incense, struck a small metal gong, and began. She asked only for my birth year. "Your father died recently. It was sudden, but he went peacefully. He had no time to talk to you and your sisters before he passed away." I was already in tears. What mattered most was not the accuracy of what followed, though it was striking, but the recognition that the years of research relationship I had built on this island had created something I had not sought. A community had opened its most sacred spaces to me in a moment of need. The difference between studying a culture and being held by it became clear in that room.

The day before, a friend had offered something equally precious, a Buddhist memorial service for my father at her family's temple, established by her great-grandfather and now maintained by the women of the family, including her sister, a local scholar and qualified nun. As she chanted, incense swirled around my father's photograph on the altar (Figure 10). The flowers, the gilded decorations, the rhythmic prayers all recalled Greek Orthodox funeral services, despite the vast cultural differences. When I offered a donation, she gently refused. This was offered as a gift between friends. What these encounters revealed, the *Yuta*'s pragmatic wisdom about the living and the dead, the Buddhist priestess's chanted compassion, was what Arnold van Gennep (1960) called liminal space, the threshold between one state of being and another where transformation becomes possible. They were sophisticated technologies for human flourishing, refined over centuries of practice. They were available to me because I had, over years of return visits, ceased to be a stranger.



Figure 10 – The interior of the Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist Temple, with my father's photo on the altar in Naze, Amami Oshima (2024)

[5] Amamian shochu (*kokutō shochu*) is a distilled spirit made from locally produced unrefined brown sugar and rice koji, and, legally, is produced only in Japan's Amami Islands.

By the end of my 2025 fellowship, I found myself in Akakina village, for research but also for a much-needed rest. Akakina is no tourist town, no shops, a few *izakayas*, no souvenirs, just a quiet village with kind people tucked along the coast. Even the DenPaku community tourism development project has been done thoughtfully, with guesthouses spread across the village and beach, nothing overbearing, nothing screaming for attention (Papoutsaki 2025b). The village remains itself. This is not accidental. It is the result of deliberate community choices made over years about what kind of place to be, a philosophy of *maagun* ("together") that holds both continuity and adaptation as equally necessary (Yamashita n.d).

One writing practice has accompanied my Amami research for several years now, contributing articles to *Horizon* magazine and to the *Nankai Nichinichi Shimbun*, the daily newspaper of the Amami Islands (Papoutsaki, 2026a). These pieces are not summaries of academic findings translated for a lay audience. They belong to a different kind of writing, addressed to a different kind of reader, shaped by a different set of obligations. Writing for island readers in their own newspaper is an exercise in accountability. The practice echoes *yui*. If the community lends you its time, its trust, and its access to its own knowledge, the obligation to return something is not courtesy. It is structural. Linda Tuhiwai Smith articulates this clearly when she says that research in community contexts is a set of relational commitments, and the failure to honour those commitments is not only an ethical failure but an epistemological one, producing worse knowledge because it produces knowledge the community cannot trust and therefore cannot use (Smith, 2012). Writing for the *Nankai Nichinichi Shimbun* is an enactment of this acknowledgement, a making-visible of the researcher's positionality to the community that has most at stake in the research.

What the island continues to teach

I am writing this article on Waiheke Island, where the ocean waves are starting to rise in late autumn. Writing about Amami from Waiheke has a particular character, one island's relational attunement mediating another island's memories, each sharpening the other. Abram writes of the risk that we "lend our lives more to consolidating, defending, or bewailing the fate of ephemeral entities (political, economic, civilizational constructs) than to nurturing and defending the actual places that physically sustain us" (Abram, 2017, p. 268). I read that passage for the first time on a Naze balcony with no internet, in the rain. It landed differently there than it would have in any library. The sensuous world was pressing its case in real time, making the argument undeniable by surrounding it.

On the last morning of my 2025 fellowship, I wrote in my field diary from Akakina:

> *Time has passed so quickly, and yet it as felt like a life. Not just six months, but a life lived here. As if I had always been here. As if I would never leave.* (Papoutsaki, 2025b).

The emplacement that Sutton theorises had, once more, done its quiet work. The island had accumulated inside me in the memories, the relationships, the writing, and the particular way the Amami humid air now lives as a reference point in my perception of any other humid air.

What Amami continues to teach is the difference between knowledge and understanding. Knowledge is producible in a field season and publishable in a journal article. Understanding, the kind of knowing that changes how you move through the world, requires

years. It requires the experience of being known as well as knowing. It requires the island to have decided, based on the evidence of your conduct over time, that you are worth teaching. The body of work produced from this research is smaller than it might have been had the methodology been extractive rather than relational. This is not a concession. It is a methodological position.

I am also aware of what I do not yet fully understand. I do not understand the Yuta's world except as a grateful recipient of its compassion. I know, too, that the years of fieldwork described in this article are not entirely a record of reception and welcome. There were conversations that closed down, moments when my understanding proved more limited than I had believed, and relationships that required years of repeated return before they softened from courtesy to trust. The more-than-human world provided its own forms of disruption. The typhoon that initiated this account is included deliberately, as a reminder that challenge and disorientation in island fieldwork arrive through the environment as much as through human interaction, and that the island's non-human world carries equal weight with its human one. Institutional expectations added further complexity, since fellowship arrangements that anchored the researcher to institutional processes and university offices rather than island communities required ongoing negotiation of the kind that long-term collaborative relationships make possible but rarely make visible in published accounts. When a long-standing local collaborator retired, the transition to building independent networks and relying on one's own accumulated relationships posed its own challenges, including the responsibility to conduct myself in a manner that would not betray the trust of connections offered in the first place because of Kuwahara-san's introductions. These tensions are not narrated in detail here. The communities and institutions involved remain active collaborators, and in a small island context, even anonymised descriptions carry risks of identification that the relational ethics governing this work do not permit. The reversals, frustrations, and missteps of a decade of fieldwork are as much a part of its record as the drumming farewell in Naon village, but they belong to the ongoing relationship rather than to this account of it. There are forms of relational accountability that manifest precisely as restraint.

As Kanai put it, with his characteristic thoughtfulness:

> *Just as there is a chemical reaction between natural materials and people in making something, I think there is also a kind of chemical reaction between people. Something unexpected becomes possible only in the actual meeting. You cannot predict it in advance. You can only put the elements together and see what colour emerges.* (Papoutsaki and Clenney, 2026).

Islands as living archives

Shima, as Jun'ichirō Suwa observed in the first issue of this journal, is a word carrying a double meaning. It names island as geographical feature and island as the small-scale social group whose interactions "densely intermesh" within a specific place (Suwa, 2006, p. 6). The word names both a topography and a social world, both a place you can map and a relation you can only enter through time and trust. Kuwahara, Ozaki and Nishimura's (2007) concept of transperipheral networks provides a specifically Amamian theoretical vocabulary for the archipelagic connectivity this conclusion invokes. Their analysis of how Japan's outer islands forge lateral connections between peripheries, bypassing the mainland centre, describes not only the communicative ecologies this research documented but also the research network

and scholarly community that the research itself has helped to build. The argument that islands are living archives, that they accumulate, connect, and teach, is, in Amamian terms, an argument about transperipheral knowledge production. In *te ao Māori* terms, it is an argument about *whakapapa*, the layering of one encounter upon another, each visit emerging from and containing the previous one. The Cretan childhood beneath the Papua New Guinean fieldwork initiation, beneath the South Pacific years, beneath Amami 2017, and 2019, 2023, 2024, and 2025. This is not a career narrative, it is a genealogy of encounters that have constituted the researcher as a particular kind of knower, in a particular relationship with a particular island.

The argument rests on three claims I want to name clearly at the close.

The first is that islands are not passive laboratories. They are active intellectual environments that shape the researchers who commit to them. The triple transformation described in this article, methodological, ontological, textual, was island-generated, enacted through years of encounter with specific people, places, practices, and presences in the Amami archipelago.

The second is that the more-than-human world is not the background of island ethnography but its content. Amami Ōshima's forests and rice fields, its typhoons and migratory birds, its lunar calendar and habu snake territories, its egrets tracking the planting season and its loudspeakers marking the island day, its mud pressed between the researcher's palms in a dying workshop, its *kenmun* marking the edges of the sacred, its *Yuta* mediating between living and ancestral worlds, these are not context for culture but co-producers of it. The *habu*, whose nocturnal presence in the forest edge maintains an ecological balance that forty-five years of misguided eradication effort could not improve upon; the mud, finite, changing, unrepeatable, the iron-rich sediment formed over 1.5 million years that the dyer enters into relationship with, all these constitute a community to be joined, not a resource to be managed. Island research that attends only to the human has not yet learnt what the island has to teach.

The third is that research carries obligation. It owes something to the communities and places that made it possible, in the stronger sense that Amamian *yui* implies, genuine lending and returning of labour, relational reciprocity that is ongoing rather than completed. This obligation extends to the most difficult questions the island raises about the sustainability of its communities in the face of depopulation and ageing, the governance challenges of UNESCO designation, the threat of development that would transform Amami from an inhabited place into a consumable destination. Harvey (2003) describes the ideal guest-researcher as one who does not assume welcome but earns it through sustained attention and honest conduct. After almost a decade in Amami, I have been learning what that looks like in practice. The island has been patient with the learning.

Kanai's summary of what a visitor owes the island is the simplest I have encountered: follow the people, and you will naturally arrive at many places. In that process, the island itself, with its mud, its forest, its songs, its snake, its spirits, its ancient dyes, will do the rest. Matthew Landrum, writing from the Faroe Islands in 2018, captures something of this in his poem 'A place on earth' that has accompanied me through much of my Amami research:

> *So let the kingdom of the everyday show itself*
> *in all its mundanity and beauty, seen afresh.*
> *We will call it heaven. It will teach us to stay*

I have thought of those lines many times, in a Naon village lane, on a Naze balcony in the rain, in a Buddhist temple where incense swirled around my father's photograph. The island teaches us to stay. Not because it keeps us captive, but because it keeps revealing something new to those willing to return.

To know Amami is, in Watsuji's terms, to be in part constituted by it, the researcher's scholarly self formed through *aidagara*, through the in-between spaces of encounter with specific people, creatures, and places. The island is not a site where knowledge happened. It is the knowledge's ancestor.

Postscript, Waiheke Island, 9 July 2026

In this transient world, upon this temporary island,
how long are we meant to dwell?
Honour the life entrusted to you
until your journey here is complete.
As the waterwheel turns, so too does time;
its endless circles will bring us together again.
In the luminous embrace of Ahagari *(moonlight),*
our spirits gather, dancing into the night.
Whatever unfolds between heaven and earth,
within the light of Ahagari*,*
our spirits continue their joyful dance.

(*'Ahagari'* – a popular Amami folk song[6])

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[6] A translator's note: "temporary island" is a poetic rendering of the Amami expression *仮島/kari shima*. Based on an Amami *min'yō* (folk song), *Ahagari* presents a distinctly Amami understanding of existence. Humans are temporary guests in a sacred world, life should be lived with reverence, time moves in recurring cycles, and beneath the moonlight the boundaries between people, ancestors, and the more-than-human world become permeable. This makes *Ahagari* especially resonant as an expression of Amami relational cosmology.

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