

# AMAMI PARK

Kagoshima-Prefectural Amami Nature And Culture Center

English description of the exhibits  
in the General Exhibition Hall



## English description of the exhibits

### in the General Exhibition Hall

The Amami Islands are surrounded by the open seas, formed by various villages sandwiched between steep mountains.

This sea, land and mountain formation has had a deep impact on the consequent development of the region's history, traditions and culture.

The general exhibition hall is a model of an Amami village, comprising the 4 zones of the Ocean Path, the Wall Exhibit, the Island Path and the Forest Path, where real-size physical exhibits, images and videos are displayed to allow visitors to obtain a real-life experience of the Amami Islands.

With this exhibition hall, everybody, from visitors to locals, as well as the younger generation whom the future rests upon, will be able to know more about the unique culture, customs and traditions of the Amami Islands through this easy-to-learn method.

There are a multitude of islands studded in the 1200 km distance spanning Kagoshima and Taiwan.

In the middle of these islands lies the Amami Archipelago, comprising the 8 islands of Kikaijima, Amami Oshima, Kakeromajima, Yorojima, Ukejima, Tokunoshima, Okinoerabujima, and Yoronjima.

In addition, due to its role as a transfer point in terms of travel and shipment of goods, as well as its situation in the middle of the Kuroshio Current (Black Stream), the Amami Archipelago has been an important port of call since times of old.

The rich culture of the Amami Islands can be said to be the result of the interaction and cultural exchange between the natives and traders who had arrived from the North via the Kuroshio Current in their bid to obtain goods from the South-East.

The Noro festival, during which prayers are made for a bountiful harvest and peace, is founded on the Unari religion, which is based on the myth of Neriyakanaya, a paradise of the gods situated beyond the seas and said to bring about bountiful harvest for the people, and mainly on Unari, who, according to Japanese lore, is worshipped for her dedication in protecting her brother Ihiri.

"The Heart of Amami" is said to be borne from the blessings of the seas and the mountains.

Majority of the villages in the Amami Islands face the open seas and have the mountains at their backs.

Behind the villages towers a mountain known as the Kamiyama (Celestial Mountain), where the guardian gods of the villages, Teruko (God of the Mountains) and Naruko (God of the Seas) were said to have descended upon.

Far beyond the seas, lies the paradise of bountiful harvest, Neriayakanaya.

A small island with a standing deity can be seen on the immediate sea, and it is where the gods are said to disembark when they arrive from the faraway Neriayakanaya.

The forests and coral reefs are said to be the boundaries of the human world, and beyond that, is the world of the gods.

Living amidst the mountains and the seas, humans thrived and engaged in agriculture production under the blessings of nature and the protection of the gods.

Places of worship such as the Mya, Toneya and Ashage are situated in the centre of the villages, creating a focal area for worship.

In times of festivals, gods would travel to the villages on celestial paths, which extended from both the Kamiyama (Celestial Mountain) and the beach to Mya.

The villagers would give the gods a warm welcome and would see the gods off after the festival.

Thus, the villages can also be regarded as a meeting place for the gods and the humans.

In addition, there are also nature spots everywhere in the village such as rivers, springs, rocks, giant trees where spirits are believed to reside.

The belief that spiritual beings reside in nature and matter and that their actions result in the various phenomena of nature has led to the continued worship of the Noro, as well as having a large impact, even till today, on the island's culture. Since ancient times, the natives of the Amami Islands have lived by reading signs from the waxing and waning of the moon, the movement of the stars, the changing of the seasons, the migration of the birds and other natural phenomena.

In the present day where the Gregorian calendar is widespread, many of the festivals and rituals in the Amami Islands are still conducted according to the lunar calendar.

#### Winter

New Year celebrations, starting with the sacrificial slaughter of a pig.

The island welcoming the dawn of a new year.

The busiest season for the production of black sugar.

#### Spring.

Rice planting, planting of sugar cane and sweet potatoes.

The seasonal festival of Sangatsu-Sanchi (3<sup>rd</sup> day of the 3<sup>rd</sup> month as according to the lunar calendar), where pests are driven off the fields, and the gods welcomed from and then seen off to Neriyakanaya with the Omuke(welcome) and the Ohori(send-off) of the Noro festival.

Summer.

Festivals such as the Arahobana, which celebrates the first harvest, as well as the Noro harvest festivals of Founme and Minyakuchi.

The Bon Festival, where the spirits of ancestors return for a visit. (Similar to Samhain)

With the end of the harvest season, people enjoy the Mihachigatsu (collective term for the 3 festivals celebrated during the 8<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar calendar) festivals.

Autumn.

Hamagan (prayers by the beach) is held at the beach where people pray for the safe return of family abroad.

And it is then winter again.

The last Noro festival of the year (usually held during the 11<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar calendar) known as Fuyunme, is held to give thanks for the sweet potato harvest.

Just as a piece of cloth is formed by the crisscross weaving at a loom, the culturally abundant Amami Islands are similarly formed with the multiple layering of the Noro festivals, the prayers of the Yuta (shaman), the year-round rituals and life ceremonies, as well as the many prayers of daily life.

Noro: During the period when the Amami Islands were still a part of the Ryukyu Kingdom, the Noro was the Kaminchu (Holy Priest) named by the King as the Chief Priest of the nation, with the main function of presiding over state rituals.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Ryukyu Kingdom legalized the religious order that was founded on the Unari belief that the "The female sibling is a divine being".

During the reign of King Shoushin (1477-1526), his sister occupied the highest ranking position of Kikoeokimi.

The next highest ranking Oamushirare and the Noro also received a written appointment from the King, appointing them to their positions.

A unique feature is that the position of Noro is passed down the generations only to females.

Yuta: A priest who specializes in supernatural phenomena and contact with divine beings and spirits, through which he/she obtains spiritual power and uses it for

fortune telling, spiritual cleansing, as well as individual counselling.

## Ocean Path

### アイノコ (合の子舟)

#### Ainoko (Canoes)

Excluding the islands of Kikaijima, Okinoerabujima and Yoronjima, the rest of the Amami Islands are mountainous islands surrounded by the open seas.

Unlike the present age of advanced traffic network systems, the people of the past depended on the "Ocean Path" as a necessity for daily life as they used it for exchange, trade, transport, travel, fishing and transshipment.

Canoes played the most essential role out on the open seas.

The unique canoes of the Amami Islands have a long-standing history and were frequently used till it was gradually phased out at the beginning of the Showa period (1926-1989).

In the Amami Islands, there are 3 types of traditional canoes known as the Subune, the Itatsuke and the Ainoko.

Subune is a canoe crafted out from a piece of log.

It was mainly used for fishing.

As it is extremely dense and does not board the waves well, it was mainly used in seas and coves near the island, as well as places with relatively calm waters such as tide pools.

It has been said that the name Subune means fishing in shallow waters.

The Itatsuke, a canoe used mainly for transportation purposes, has a shallow hull and similarly shaped bow and stern.

The Itatsuke comes in various sizes, from small-sized canoes to large-sized canoes.

The unique feature of this canoe is that both bow and stern are similarly shaped, hence despite its slow speed and poor manoeuvrability, it is an extremely stable canoe and can be easily navigated, even by amateurs.

The Ainoko, which is now widely referred to as the Itatsuke.

Ainoko is an evolutionary hybrid, created by combining the merits of the previous Itatsuke canoe and the Okinawan traditional fishing canoe, the Sabani.

The Sabani moves at great speed and is easily to manoeuvre, however it is unstable and capsizes easily if handled by amateurs.

The fishermen from Itoman City in Okinawa often go for long journeys, even traveling

abroad for long periods of time aboard the Sabini. They possess excellent skills and techniques in controlling the canoe, being able to return the canoe afloat immediately in times of capsizes and also preventing the equipment aboard from sinking into the sea.

We have interviewed Mr Yutaka Tsuboyama, the recognized top singer of folk songs of the Amami Archipelago, as well as being a master craftsman of the Ainoko canoe.

The craftsman who designed and built the original Ainoko canoe was Mr Tsuboyama's master from Nikko, Mr Mankichi Ebihara (birthplace: Miyazaki Prefecture).

He travelled from Miyazaki to Okinawa, where he studied the craft of building the Sabini, reputed to be the treasure of all Itoman fishermen. Later he married a native of Oganeku, Yamato and settled down there for life.

When he initially received orders for handcrafted canoes, although he was well aware of the merits of the Sabini canoe, the crafting of such canoes were by any means no easy feat. Thus, he expanded on his well-developed crafting techniques for the Itatsuke canoe by incorporating the merits of the Sabini canoe's bow and stern structure.

Orders increased when the ease of control and manoeuvrability became apparent with use.

The Itatsuke was gradually supplanted by the Ainoko as the main type of canoe used. Mr Tsuboyama was accepted as an apprentice canoe craftsman when he was 20 years old and since then, has been crafting Ainoko canoes for the past 55 years.

Till now, he has crafted more than 1900 canoes.

He has been striving to maintain the traditional spirit of his craft, apparent from his particular attention to details during his crafting, such as obtaining cedar wood from Miyazaki Prefecture and drying them for half a year, then crafting the canoes skilfully based on his well-honed instinct and the many experiences he has heard from the fishermen.

Although recent developments have allowed for canoes modelled after the Itatsuke canoe to be built with reinforced plastic (FRP: Fibre Reinforced Plastic), the Ainoko is still used in the island's traditional festivals and canoe races as part of the surviving culture developed through the Kuroshio Current(Black Stream).

## **Island Path**

### **Ashage: Place of worship**

In every village in the Amami Oshima, there is an open space called Mya, which

originally meant “palace”, but is now used to refer to a garden or an open space. Ashage is a rectangular building situated beside the Mya, and is used as a venue for conducting ceremonial rites to invite the gods.

The gods would usually arrive by boat from the paradise of Neriyakana during the 2<sup>nd</sup> month of the lunar year, bringing with them bountiful harvest for the people. They would disembark at the offshore rocks known as the standing deity.

They would then moor their boats and proceed up the beach near the villages.

They would move from the beach, which is known as the Omuke (arrival and departure area) and proceed up the Kamimichi (celestial path) to the Mya of the villages.

In addition, the guardian deities of the villages would descend from the sky (the celestial world of Obotsu Kagura) upon the Kamiyama (Celestial Mountain) behind the villages.

The deities who descended from the skies would then travel along the Kamimichi (celestial path) to the Mya.

The gods tasked with the protection of the villages would then possess the Noro at the Ashage to assume the responsibility of protecting the villages.

These gods are known as Raihoshin (visiting gods).

The Ashage comes in various forms but the Ashage at the Uken Village, with its four walls, closely resembles a regular villager's residence.

The Ashage at the Kakeromajima is a building without any walls and has only pillars for support. The Ashage in the General Exhibition Hall is modelled after the Adachi, (the Ashage of Kakeromajima).

Mya: The sacred place where ceremonial rites and related activities would take place. Although it used to be that the Mya comprised the Kami Ashage (Ashage for the gods), the Toneya, the sumo competition grounds as well as the grounds for the 8th month dance, the various facilities were gradually moved to other places, especially the sumo competition grounds, which moved to more spacious grounds.

Obotsu Kagura: This refers to the place where the deities reside.

## Ibiganashi

The Ibiganashi refers to a natural rock that stands in a sacred place within every village in Amami Oshima.

Although it has been referred to as Shimagosuganashi (in Takena, Kakeiromajima), it is usually unnamed.

The most distinctive Ibiganashi is a massive natural boulder that stands beside the

Ashage of Sukomo in Kakeiromajima.

The exhibit in the General Exhibition Hall is modelled after the Ibiganashi found in Yui, Setouchi-cho.

The 2 divine trees of Gajumaru (Chinese Banyan) and the Ahogi (evergreen), also known as Ako in standard Japanese, stand majestically in the Mya.

There are a few Ibi (rocks) around the base of the gigantic tree standing in the Mya (the Gajumaru exhibit is a replica), commonly referred to as Ibiganashi.

These are believed to be the resident guardian deities that protect the villages and are known as Zaijugami.

The belief that Ibi are graves of the early ancestors who built the villages was derived from the name Shimagosuganashi (name given to the Ibi in Takena, Kakeiromajima).

The rocks placed around the base of the divine trees standing in the Mya are worshipped as guardian deities.

## Housing

Till the beginning of the Showa Period, the houses were mostly thatched-roof houses, with flat boards for walls. It was rare for houses to have tiled roofs.

The veranda was originally built outdoors, but such design was gradually replaced with indoor verandas with the onset of the Taisho Period.

The Omote (main building) is connected to both wings (rooms, or lounges) known as Togura, by walkways commonly referred to as Toima.

It was common for the wealthy or the officials to have kitchens below their sleeping quarters.

The distinctive feature of the Amami Islands' architecture is that the residences do not have a hallway at the entrance.

Hence, only the owner or his guests are permitted to enter the main building through its entrance.

## Togura Shirude

Replications of the Togura and the Shirude are exhibited here.

The Togura is a room at the back of the house which serves as a dining room and a kitchen.

Such architecture was still common till the late 1950s.

As the Amami Islands enjoy a subtropical climate, the humidity is high at an all year-round level of 70 %. Thus, many methods of food preservation have been developed.



Due to the fact that it is an island, rainwater is usually collected and stored for use in times of water shortage.

The God of Water is placed on the shelf in the Togura and worshipped.

Above the Shirude (earthen floor) stands the altar of the Hinukan (God of Fire). Potable water, Nari miso (miso made from cycad pulp), lard, Papaiya (papaya) pickles, Rakyo (shallot) pickles, Ninniku (garlic) pickles and etc are some examples of preserved foods.

Miso, which features predominantly in the food culture of the Amami Islands, is made when all the members of the family gather together. The finished product is then stored in a kame (jar).

Miso is generally categorized into 2 categories due to their different uses, the Chajokemisu (miso paste used for refreshments served with tea) and the Shiruwashimisu (used in the making of miso soup).

What makes the miso of the Amami Islands especially special is that when the fruit of the Sotetsu (cycad) ripens, it is harvested around the end of autumn and the beginning of winter and added to the miso.

During the making of the miso, all the housewives in the neighbourhood would gather around with their pestle and help each other to pound the miso.

After the miso is completed, bowls of noodles would be served to all in reward of their hard work. This also serves as a place for social interaction and exchange. In addition, cooking oil is also made in the household.

Although pork is an integral part of the food culture in the Amami Islands, the oil used for cooking and flavouring is usually obtained from the pig sacrificed during New Year.

The oil can be easily obtained just by heating the fat and the lipid membrane removed from the pig.

The oil is then stored in a small jug placed in the kitchen for use.

Although the containers come in various shapes and sizes, the difference between a kame (jug) and a tsubo (pot) lies in the size of the opening. The container with a small opening is a tsubo (pot) and the container with a large opening is a kame (jug).

## Omote

The building of the main house usually contains the 3 rooms of the Omote Zashiki (guestroom), the Nesho (bedroom) and the Nando (drawing room).

There is usually a Jiro (hearth), usually known as Irori in standard Japanese, in each Nesho (bedroom) and in the Togura.

The Jiro (hearth) in the Nesho is rarely used during the summer while the Jiro inbuilt in the Togura is usually used during the summer.

Firewood and fish are usually placed within the Amada, a hanging shelf suspended above the Jiro (hearth).

Some thatched-roof houses that were reconstructed using materials obtained from old residences in the village of Koshi, Setouchi-cho are exhibited in the theme parks in Amami Park. They have been modelled after the houses of the past.

## Sotetsu

Sotetsu (or commonly known as the cycad, a plant belonging to the cycadophyta family) is a distinct feature of the southern lands of the Amami Islands.

It is not an overstatement to say that the ancestors of the Amami islanders depended on the Sotetsu for their survival during times of disasters and famines.

It was a staple which also served as a famine food from the recent past till the beginning of the Showa Period.

It is now treasured as a decorative plant.

In the past, people could be seen working with the Sotetsu in every corner of the villages.

Starch can be obtained from both the fruit and the stem of the Sotetsu (cycad). However, as starch derived from the Sotetsu contains toxic substances such as formalin and cyasin, care must be taken during the starch extraction process.

Should one be careless in the removal of the toxic, they could be poisoned and it might result in their death.

However, provided that proper handling was ensured to remove all traces of toxic, the Sotetsu (cycad) is an excellent ingredient as it has been proven by recent studies to be rich in iron and copper, therefore having excellent properties such as improving the blood circulation and restoring vitality.

As the toxic cyasin is water-soluble, the starch is first soaked in water for a period of 7~10 days, removed and allowed to ferment. The starch is then dried under the sun.

The toxic removal process is done in a few steps. Firstly, the shell is cracked and the fruit removed. (This step is known as Nari-wari).

The fruit is pounded continuously in a mortar and the powder is dried under the sun. The powder is then soaked in water, removed and sun-dried. The toxic is removed through repetition of this step.

To consume the stem of the Sotetsu (cycad), the black outer scale-like bark is removed and the whitish inner flesh is cut into slices that are approximately the thickness of white bread. They are soaked in water to remove the toxic, and then dried under the sun.

After the toxic is sufficiently removed, the slices are then pounded into powder as per the process for the cycad fruit.

The powder is then shaped into a round ball the size of a rice ball, then dried under the sun.

The powdered stem and the powdered fruit are eaten as porridge.

Presently, it is also used as an ingredient in the making of miso paste.

## **Banana Fibre Cloth**

The clothing worn for the longest period of time during the olden days of the Amami Islands is clothing weaved from banana leaves.

The leaves used for such cloth were known as the Okinawan banana leaves, also known as the Ito banana leaves.

Although banana mountains are scarce in this present time and age, banana mountains could be found everywhere on the island during the Taisho Period, especially in beds of loose rocks found along the shores, at the foot of mountains and in valleys.

Such clothing weaved from banana leaves were worn during the summer as work clothes and even worn during the winter in multiple layers to ward off the biting cold.

As people of the olden Satsuma feudal age had to be self-sufficient to the point of making their own clothing, banana mountains were extremely precious resources.

A number of steps are required in the process of weaving cloth from banana leaves.

A banana plant with fibre that can yield high quality textiles is selected and the plant is laid flat. One or two leaves are then plucked from the outer leaves.

This is known as the Hinoribasa, which is torn into strips and dried.

The Hinoribasa is made into strings or cords.

The plant is then stripped of half of its leaves, halfway to the core of the plant.

These are known as Arabasa, and are meant for the textiles used in the making for work clothes and everyday clothing.

Following which, the remaining leaves known as the Ajirabasa or the Yarabasa are then removed all the way to the core.

These are meant for textiles used in the fabrication of clothes worn during clear days.

As these are fully mature leaves, remarkably glossy and beautifully shiny fibres are produced.

These are known as Kyobarasa and Ajirabasa.

Such fibres are used in the making of top-quality clothing.

It has been said that only an expert with a great number of years of experience under their belt would be able to determine and select the fully mature leaves that will yield such top-quality fabrics.

The leaves are cooked in lye, removed and any remaining lye is stripped off. The fibre is then extracted and soaked overnight in stream water.

The raw material obtained is then hung out to dry.

The dried raw material is then hung in bundles around the house, taken and used for Oomi when required.

Oomi is the process where threads are obtained by running the fingertips and nails along the fibres from the roots upwards to separate them into individual fibres. The fibres are then knotted to form a continuous thread. The completed threads are then placed in a basket.

Threads of high quality are chosen from amongst the completed threads and taken up by a spinning wheel or a reeling device.

The threads are twisted up on a bobbin.

The spinner controls the spinning wheel with their right hand and the bobbin with their left hand. The bobbin winds yarn from the spinning wheel. A *tan* (unit length of a reel of spun yarn) is produced with 5 rotations of the thread around the bobbin.

One *tan* was defined as 8.48m.

Presently, it is defined as 9.09m.

Once the required number of strands is obtained, the cross strands are laid above the spun threads and the spun threads removed from the bobbin. The entire piece is then weaved together using a weaving machine.

The art of weaving banana fibre cloth is treasured as a traditional craft of the Amami Islands and the entire process can be said to be the accumulated essence of their forefathers' wisdom and hard work. This traditional craft is also the foundation for the fabrication process of the famous Oshima Tsumugi (pongee silk) fabric.

## Forest Path

A nature haven with prevalent mystical age-old feel and teeming with life, nature and wilderness, the Amami Islands are aptly named the Galapagos of the East Ocean.

The great forests, believed to be the dwelling of spirits and gods as well as home to the many unique creatures of the Amami Islands, awe visitors with their magnificence and majesty.

Amongst the islands of the Amami Archipelago, the islands of Amami Oshima and Tokunoshima are islands shrouded within the deep mountains.

Deep within the forests, there exists an ancient divine tree which is also the dwelling of various protected species.

Amongst the flora and fauna of the Amami Islands, there is the nationally protected special resource, the Amami (black) Rabbit, as well as many other nationally protected resources such as the Ryukyu Robin, the Lidth 's Jay, the Amami Thrush, the Owston 's (white-backed) Woodpecker, the Ryukyu Long-tailed Giant Rat, the Japanese Wood Pigeon, the Okinawa Spiny Rat and the Amami Woodcock.

In addition, located upstream of the Sumiyo River is the nationally protected resource of the Kamiya National Forest, a forest of hundred-year old Sudajii trees (a genus of evergreen trees known as castanopsis). There is also the nationally protected Ukeson Yuwan-dake, a mountain with an elevation of 694.4 m above the sea-level, found within a subtropical forest where various endangered species thrive.

Various life-sized models of the flora and fauna of the Amami Islands are exhibited in the General Exhibition Hall. Many night shots of the forests, re-created with audio and visual effects, are also on display to enable visitors to experience such rare scenes.

## **Wall Exhibit**

Life on the Amami Islands is closely interrelated to the sea.

In the ancient times, scenes of people gazing out to the sea could be seen in each and every village.

The people used the ebb and flow of tides as well as the waxing and waning of the moon to tell the time, forecast the weather, plan their fishing and agricultural activities as well as other aspects of their daily lives.

Despite the national adoption of the Gregorian calendar, many of the agricultural and production activities on the Amami Islands are still planned according to the rhythm of the lunar calendar (However, some villages have started following the Gregorian calendar for the Obon Festival).

Yearly events are traditional group celebrations held annually in thanks for the bountiful harvest bestowed by the changing of the seasons.

In the southern Amami Islands, the festivities are centred on praying for the coming

year's harvest as well as for Un Festivals, which are held in prayer for an abundant harvest and to ward off disasters. During the period from October to June of the following year (based on the lunar calendar), villagers have to undergo strenuous manual labour as well as make preparations to welcome the gods by abstaining from food and certain acts to purify the body and mind. The other 3 months is viewed as a time for merry-making and festive celebrations.

Noborishomu stated the following in his literary work, "The History of Oshima".

"We of Amami Oshima, alongside with Okinawa, is a culture hotspot with enduring traditions unique to our region that is at the southern tip of Japan's culture. External influences from other developing cultures were rare due to its desolate location and it was also precisely the isolated nature of the area that allowed the preservation of such ancient culture, earning us the pride of being an invaluable cultural resource that has retained many unblemished characteristics of a pre-historic culture.

As the Amami Archipelago retains the ancient culture of Japan, which has been wiped out from the main island of Japan long since, the many cultural treasures and museums have made it an invaluable asset. However, it is treasured for more than this reason. As Amami Oshima is geographically situated between Satsuma (Kagoshima) and Ryukyu (Okinawa), it is sandwiched by the main island of Japan, China and the South Seas. Hence, it has long since played a vital role as a route and a crossroad for cultural exchange.

In comparison with the various year-round Noro festivals that serve as the basic foundation of life on the Amami Islands, photographs of festivals and events that occur in the daily lives of the villagers are shown alongside photographs depicting life in the 1950s on the theme wall exhibit.

## **Welcoming of the Gods**

The Noro (holy priest) will prepare to welcome the Raihoshin (visiting gods) visiting from the mountains (Teruko) and the seas (Naruko) to the Amami Islands.

The welcoming is held on the 2<sup>nd</sup> month of the lunar year, at the Toneya (place of worship) of Kiji, Setouchi-cho. (Footnote 1)

3 days before the festival, the Atari (in-charge) collects 1 Go (approx. 0.18 litres) of rice from each household to make the Mishaku (holy wine), which is then tied to the pillar of the Toneya.

After which the Noro (holy priest) will then chant prayers at the Toneya.

The Noros (holy priests) will gather at the Toneya and drink the holy wine.

The gods will reside at the Toneya and the Ashage from the day of the Omuke till the Ohori (the send-off).

Footnote 1 (Toneya)

It refers to the residence of the Noro on the Amami Islands.

It is also the venue where the Noro conducts ceremonial activities.

There is the Upper Toneya and the Lower Toneya, which are side by side.

The only village with both Toneyas intact is in Daikuma, in the city of Naze.

Footnote 2 (Ashage)

In times of ceremonial activities, the gods are welcomed at the Ashage.

The Ashage exhibit on display in the Amami Park is modelled after the Ashage in the Adachi village in the eastern part of the Kakeromajima Island, south of Amami Oshima.

The beverage known as "Miki" is always offered to the gods.

It offered as a white liquid in a bowl.

The pot contains simmered sweet potatoes, which is a base ingredient in the making of "Miki".

The mixture is then stored in a jar with banana leaves covering the surface and left to ferment for 3 days.

The mixture is ladled into a legged drinking vessel and offered to the mountain deities and sea deities.

## Ohori (Sending off the gods)

It is the event where Raihoshin (visiting gods) visiting from the mountains (Teruko) and the seas (Naruko) are sent off.

The welcoming ceremony is held on the 2<sup>nd</sup> month of the lunar year while the send-off is held on the 4<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year.

In Setouchi-cho and Seso of the Kakeromajima Island, when it is time to send off the deities, the Noro would proceed along the Kamimichi (path of the gods) to the beach (Teruko, Naruko) while chanting prayers.

The Noros would stand in a row at the beach, waving farewell to the gods, after which they would then return to the Toneya.

Rocks carved with images depicting the gods raising the anchor of their boats can be found along the beaches of Setouchi-cho and the island of Yoronjima.

## Arahobana

It is a Noro ceremony held in celebration of the first harvest in Kakeromajima. The first harvest celebrations held by the commoners are also known as Shikyoma. In Adachi of Setouchi-cho, the Noros (holy priests) gather at the Ashage (place of worship) during the Uchigihei, which falls on the first Tsuchinoe of the 6<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year.

Note: Tsuchinoe is a day designated according to the stem-branch cycle system of marking days of the lunar year.

The Guji Noro will obtain 7 stalks of rice from the fields and the stalks are threshed in a mortar.

The grains are then hung at the Toneya.

During the next Tsuchinoe, the Noro would then hold the Arahobana ceremony, where he would place the grains in a mortar and rotate it thrice.

Footnote 3 (Guji)

The Guji is the male attendant tasked with the preparation of food for the Noro and Ukan during Noro ceremonies.

He is also referred to as the Gujinushi.

A Guji is assigned to the Chief Noro and to the 2 Ukan respectively.

As with the Noro, the Guji is only selected from particular bloodlines.

The Guji assigned to the Chief Noro is tasked with managing the Lower Toneya, which is the residence of the Chief Noro, the ceremonial items and is also in charge of the backstage preparations for all ceremonial events.

During the feudal times, the Guji would work the Tejiri rice and vegetable fields (fiefs) and then use the rice and crops harvested in the various ceremonies.

The Chief Noro

The Chief Noro is the main focus of religious beliefs in the Amami Islands.

During the time of the Okinawa monarchy, the Noro was chosen from the nobility to achieve cohesion of politics and religion.

There were also 2 Ukan chosen as her assistants.

These 3 had the responsibility of fulfilling the 3 roles of the Noro.

They were given fiefs (Tejiri rice and vegetable fields) which they tilled to produce crops.

The harvested crops were then used for ceremonial events as well as for their own consumption.

**Ufunme.Funme**



It is one of the Noro ceremonial events held during the 6<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year in Kakeromajima.

Although the date varies across the villages, the various villages celebrate the first harvest of millet during the Tsuchinoe and the Kanoe of the 6<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year.

Note: Tsuchinoe and Kanoe are days of the lunar year, designated as such according to the stem-branch cycle system of marking days of the lunar year.

The celebration for the first harvest of millet is conducted in a similar fashion to the Arahobana, except for the fact that grains of millet from the first harvest are added in the making of the Mishaku (holy wine). (As opposed to the making of Mishaku from pure rice in the Arahobana)

Mishaku is splashed onto the base of the pillars of the Ashage and the Toneya as it is said to have properties that prevent termite infestations.

## Minyakuchi

It is the ceremony conducted by the Noro of the Kakerojima Island to pray for a good harvest.

Minyakuchi is said to literally mean water mouth, or an exit for water flow.

There are still 4 villages in Satsukawa currently practising this ceremony.

In Takena, the ceremony is held in the Ashage on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tsuchinoto of the 6<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year.

Note: Tsuchinoto is a day designated according to the stem-branch cycle system of marking days of the lunar year.

The Atari (in charge) will collect rice from each household and reduce the rice into powder. Next, she would then cook the powder with juices obtained from raw sweet potatoes and store the mixture in a jar for later use in the making of Mishaku (holy wine).

The Kamichu would sit on rattan mats, drink the holy wine and chant prayers for a bountiful harvest.

It is viewed as the closing of a series of harvest and thanksgiving celebrations, beginning with the Arahobana

The Minyaku is celebrated on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July in Ikegachi of the Uken Village in Amami Oshima.

The Noro, accompanied by the Gujinushi (male attendant), would make their way to the mouth of the irrigation system. There, they would rotate a hoe thrice and rinse it

with holy wine while chanting prayers.

## Shochogama

It is the harvest and thanksgiving festival celebrated on the first Hinoue of the 8<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year (this particular day is known as Arasetu) in Akina of Tatsugo-cho, Amami Oshima.

Note: Hinoue is a day designated according to the stem-branch cycle system of marking days of the lunar year.

The Hirasemankai festival also falls on the same day.

A crude straw hut consisting of only a sloped roof is built at high grounds and young boys new to the festival are made to stomp on the roof. This is to pray for the growth and development of the boy. The males would clamber up onto the roof and stomp on the roof while singing chants (usually sung by the Guiji) to welcome the harvest gods. When the chant ends, the men would then continue the stomping till the roof caves in while shouting “Nura, Mera”.

Everybody would then dance the 8th month dance on the collapsed roof to express their gratitude for the harvest and pray for a good harvest for the coming year.

The Hiraseyangai is conducted (evening-females-Suiheisenuenogami god) in total contrast to this ceremony (morning-males-Suichoku god).

The ceremonies are unique in that they are held on the two high tides of the same day.

## Hirasemangai

It is the harvest and thanksgiving festival celebrated on the first Hinoue of the 8<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year (this particular day is known as Arasetu) in Akina of Tatsugo-cho, Amami Oshima.

Note: Hinoue is a day designated according to the stem-branch cycle system of marking days of the lunar year.

The Shochogama is also held on the same day.

The ceremony is conducted on two boulders known as the Kamihirase and the Merabehirase, both located west of the beach.

The Chief Noro, accompanied by 5 Noros, would scale the Kamihirase, while 7 Kaminchu of mixed gender would scale the Merabehirase. They would then make beckoning gestures while singing.

This is to invite the gods from afar (horizon) to descend, so that they (villagers) may express their gratitude for the harvest and pray for the bountiful harvest of the coming season.

In addition, red bean rice are offered between two flat rocks on the Kamihirase (boulder) and a young girl new to the ceremony is made to step on the boulder as a form of prayer for her health and growth.

The 8th month dance takes place at the conclusion of the celebratory banquets held by each village.

## Fuyunme

It is the Noro ceremony held in celebration of the year 's yam harvest and to pray for a bountiful harvest in the coming year.

It is held at the Toneya on the Tsuchinoe of the 11<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year.

The Kamiginu (priestly robes), Kamisaji (short white train that reaches the waist) and the Kaburikazura (a crown of Kaburikazura leaves) are not used in this ceremony.

The holy wine used is the Mikka-mishaku (holy wine that has been prepared 3 days in advance)

Taros, yams and sweet potatoes are placed on a raised tray and served in offering.

The Kamichu(s) would then drink the holy wine and dance in front of the offering.

The villagers do not participate in this ceremony.

## New Year (Celebrations)

Ikebana (flower arrangement) using pine, Kagamimochi (double-stacked round rice cakes) and Sanbushike (literally meaning three treasures, but is in reality a mound of salt), Konbu (seaweed) and dried fish are placed at the Tokonoma (an alcove) in offering. There are also Yatsugashira(s) (a type of sweet potato) and Tsurukame (carved from radish) set on a large dish as well as a Suzuributa (a dish of 5-in thick meat slices and vegetables) and a Sangondai (a small raised wooden tray usually used as a tray for offerings).

At the break of dawn, all members of the family gather at the Tokonoma and are seated in order of seniority, with the head of the household facing the assembled members.

The Sangon ceremony is then conducted.

## Wakamizu

This refers to the first draw of water from springs or wells on the start of the New Year.

The meaning has gradually evolved to refer to the water drawn early in the morning of the Hounen festival and offered to the Noro god. The festival falls on the 15<sup>th</sup> day since the start of the New Year.

This water is also added into the chikaramizu (gargle) used by the sumo wrestlers during a sumo match.

## Sangon

This is a ceremony held on New Year 's Day in the Amami Islands.

On the day of the Sangon, an odd-sized group of 5 or 7, including the head of the household, would partake food and wine that were set out as offerings.

It is a 3-dish course, with the first dish being a bowl of 7 simmered foods, followed by 2 slices of sashimi and rounded up with a dish of simmered chicken.

During the course, the head of the household would also pass out wine and one of the 3 types of Takazen (salt, seaweed and dried fish).

## Sangatsusanchi

It is one of the annual events held in the Amami Islands and Okinawa.

It is a ceremony held down at the beach and falls on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of the 3<sup>rd</sup> month (lunar year) across the Amami Islands, but is held on the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year in the Tokunoshima Island.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of the 3<sup>rd</sup> month, rice cakes are made and then offered to the ancestors. All the villagers, irrespective of age and gender, would go down to the beach to pick clams and have fun.

There is the superstition that if food obtained from the sea is not added to the dinner pot on this day, one would become deaf or not be able to obtain any catch for the remaining year.

In Yoronjima, children new to this festival would be showered with water from the sea, and made to carry a basket.

Children from families with recent occurrences of childbirths or funerals cannot participate in this ceremony.

In the Tokunoshima Island, the Hamaore is conducted over a period of three days (Hinoe, Hinoto and Tsuchinoe) of the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year after the Obon (festival to

pay respects to the deceased).

Note: Hinoe, Hinoto and Tsuchinoe are days designated according to the stem-branch cycle system of marking days of the lunar year.

The Hinoe is the day of preparation for the festival, where a small hut is set up at the beach and 3 coral rocks used to construct a hearth.

On the Hinoto, Sekihan (red bean rice) is made and the entire family, decked out in their finest clothes, makes their way to the beach.

The foreheads of babies born since the Hamaore held the year before last would be anointed with seawater, and then the child would be made to step on the white sands of the beach.

## Mushi Okuri (Maneashibi, Hamaore)

It is the ceremony held to ward off pests where field mice, grasshoppers and snails are captured and washed down the seas.

In Kudadon of Setouchi in Amami Oshima, villagers go to the fields to catch pests on the Hatsumane (first afternoon of the 4<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year), wrap the pests in sweet potato leaves and proceed down the beaches to wash the pests down the sea.

In the Kakerojima Island, the same festival is held either on the day of Tora or on the day of Saru of the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year. The festival on the day of Tora is known as Tora-ashibi while the festival on the day of the Saru is known as the Sanashibi. The day of celebration differs with each village.

In the Kikaijima Island, the pests are set on sugar cane leaves and floated out to the sea on the day of the Kinoene of the 4<sup>th</sup>~6<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year.

Note: Kinoene is a day that is designated as such according to the stem-branch method of calculating days of the lunar year.

In the north-eastern part of the Tokunoshima Island, the villagers dance the Mushiodoi (pest-warding dance) and then float the pests on Kuba canoes out to the sea.

Kuba canoe: A small toy canoe carved from the core of the betel palm, with the betel palm leaf used as the sail.

In the islands of Amami Oshima and Tokunoshima, the ceremonies of Ajirana and Mane held to ward off Habu snakes (pit vipers) are unique in their closely intertwined relationship.

Footnote 4 「Mane」 (pronounced as ma-ah-ne)

All work is halted on the Umanohi of the 4<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year to prepare for the Hatsumae festival.

It is a ceremony held in prayer to contain the Habu snakes and to avoid mishaps. Umanohi occurs thrice in the 4<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year and thus the Mane is conducted thrice a year.

Although it is not a fixed tradition, on this day, each household would usually drink juice of the chinese chive or prepare snacks made from the juice, flour and Japanese black sugar.

This flour is known as Hatai flour.

This period is the harvest season of wheat.

### **5<sup>th</sup> day of the 5<sup>th</sup> month (Gogatsugonchi)**

It is the festival of the Tango.

It is held on the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the 5<sup>th</sup> month as according to the lunar calendar.

The story of a man who managed to shake off a persistent ghost by hiding amongst a calamus patch has been passed down the generations and has led to the tradition of hanging stalks of calamus and mugwort at the front of the house to ward off evil spirits and avoid all illnesses.

In addition, Akumaki (glutinous rice wrapped in the skin of bamboo shoots) is made and offered to the gods.

### **Shikyoma**

This ceremony is deemed the most important ceremony amongst the various rice planting ceremonies conducted during the first harvest festivals of the Amami Islands.

The Noro ceremony of Arahobana gradually evolved and came to be practised in the households, with the name varying across regions such as Shikoma, Shikyoma, Inishikuma (Naze) and Uchikihe (Kakerojima).

During the 6<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year, each household would clean the inner and outer part of their house thoroughly and bring in several stalks of rice from the fields to offer to the gods. They would also add some of the newly harvested rice grains into the pot of cooking rice and offer a portion to the gods while partaking the remaining during meals.

In the outskirts of Naze, villagers would pick 3 stalks of newly harvested rice from the fields in the evening and place them at the Tokonoma in offering.

In the northern parts of Amami Oshima, a mixture of newly harvested rice and old rice are cooked and distributed to children, who would then proceed to high elevations

within the village and from there, yell the name of the rice field and their prayer that the particular field would be blessed with a bountiful harvest.

The newly harvested rice is then used in preparation for everyday meals from the Hinoe day after the Shikyoma ceremony.

## Bon Festival

On the Tanabata (7<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month), villagers would visit the graveyards and inform the departed that it would be another 7 days till the Obon Festival and to be sure to make their way here (land of the living).

On the dawn of the 13<sup>th</sup> day, the bamboo used in the Tanabata festival is stripped of its branches and leaves, leaving the stem which is used as a makeshift vase at graves. In the evenings, villagers would make their way to the graves and carry lighted lanterns to welcome the souls of the departed.

In addition, shelves are set up in the outer part of the gardens with offerings to water ghosts and wandering spirits (ghosts with nobody to tend to their graves).

The tablet is removed from the Butsudan (Buddhist altar) and placed on the ceremonial altar (table), which is set up at the Tokonoma or on the floor. Incense, flowers, sweets, offerings not produced by the household (mainly steamed sweets, fruits, vegetables and etc), tea and wine are placed in offering on the ceremonial altar. A straw mat is placed under the ceremonial altar and food offerings are placed on the mat and enclosed with a folding screen.

The amount of food offered is adjusted in accordance with the number of tablets.

The meals are served in the mornings and evenings of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> day. The meals used to be strictly vegetarian fare before the advent of the Taisho Period, but have gradually changed such that the contents now vary with each household.

## Mihachigatsu

It is the event held on the 8<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year in Amami Oshima.

It is referred to as such as it comprises the ceremonies of Arasetsu, Shibasashi and Donga.

The 8<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year is an event-filled month.

It is also a season of moonlight-bathed beauty and gentle northern breeze, coupled with plentiful amounts of taro and sweet potatoes following the end of the harvest period of rice, chestnuts and sugarcane.

## **Arasetsu**

The first Hinoe of the 8<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year is the Arasetsu.

The day before the Arasetsu is known as the day of Shikari (the literal meaning of shikari is to prepare, thus this day is a day meant to prepare for a festival, or a pre-festival day) or is also sometimes known as Yuhashi (to wait out the night) and is the preparation day for the Arasetsu festival.

Housewives start making rice cakes.

Villagers dance the 8<sup>th</sup> month dance at night, starting from the Toneya (the Noro place of worship) and then to each household in the village.

The Arasetsu is a ceremony conducted in worship of Kosoganashi, during which the womenfolk would arise in the early morning and make their way to the beach. They would then pour seawater over their bodies to cleanse and purify themselves, after which they would then prepare offerings of new grain, rice cake, sweet potatoes, whole fishes and wine on an offering tray and place it in front of the Tokonoma (alcove) or the veranda.

Sekihan (red-bean rice) is prepared on this particular day, and the water used in washing the rice is sprinkled throughout the house with a Japanese pampas grass.

This is known as the Sechibakeshun (change of seasons).

The day following the Arasetsu is known as the Keshibade (day of fun) and is a holiday.

## **Shibasashi**

The Shibasashi falls on the Mizunoe, which is the 7<sup>th</sup> day following the Arasetsu.

As it has been said that Kosoganashi would visit from the beyond on this day, villagers would visit the graveyards on the previous morning to pay their respects to the dead.

The villagers would hang stalks of Japanese pampas grass in front of the house and at the four corners of the fields.

In addition, the villagers would set rice husks and grass aflame at their doorsteps to generate smoke in welcome of Kosoganashi.

Similar to the Arasetsu, the villagers dance the 8<sup>th</sup> month dance.

In Akina of Tatsugo-cho, the ceremonies of Shochogamu and Hirase Mankai are held on the morning of the Arasetsu.

## **Donga**

The Donga falls on the day of the Kinoene after the Shibasashi, and is the finale of the August events in the northern part of Amami Oshima. Kaiso (reburial) is conducted on the day of the Shikari (eve of the Donga).



On this day, most families prepare meals of rice mixed with sweet potatoes.

Donga is the most significant event of the Mihachigatsu events. On this day, daughters would return to the in-laws and visit the family burial plots to pay their respects. The 8<sup>th</sup> day following the Donga is known as the Kanotohitsuji, where villagers on the southern part of Amami Oshima would celebrate the Tomochi.

Kaiso (reburial), senkotsu (washing of bones) (Footnote 5) and visitation of the family burial plots are done on the eve of the Tomochi.

In short, the Donga and the Tomochi (event held at the southern part of Amami Oshima) are held at the end of summer.

The only notable remaining event would be the New Year celebrations.

Remembrance of ancestors and prayers of good harvests are a common theme of the Mihachigatsu events.

Footnote 5 「Kaiso (Reburial), Senkotsu (Washing of bones)」

It is a definite that the corpse would decay and any decay of the coffin would result in the soil above caving in and further soiling the corpse.

It is believed that with a soiled corpse, the soul would not be able to make its way to the Purified Land (Gushugukuraku). Hence there is the need to remove the soil and wash away the taint of decay so that the soul can attain everlasting peace.

With this in mind, Kaiso (reburial) is done after a certain period of time.

The underlying idea behind Kaiso (reburial) is “Kyorasa Nashi Oseru” (to cleanse), where the act is to aid the soul in obtaining entry into the Gushugukuraku.

This is according to the popular belief of Gushu, which literally means “the afterlife”, where humans reside at the world of Koso (Land of the Dead) after their deaths.

Kaiso (reburial) is held when all flesh has decomposed and only the bones are left remaining.

For burial plots located in soil that promotes the decaying process, it is common that the reburial is held on the following year or two years after the 3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of death. For burial plots in soil highly incompatible to the decaying process, reburial is usually held after the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of death.

On the other hand, as the headstone is usually erected at the same time as the reburial process, reburials have occasionally been known to be postponed time and again due to economic constraints in the purchase of a headstone.

In addition, reburials have also been known to drag on for ages despite concrete plans as there are certain periods of time unsuitable to conduct reburials.

The periods of time deemed unsuitable for reburials are leap years or when there is

a recent death in the family.

Although the day of the reburial varies across the region, it is fixed within a village; hence reburial cannot be held at one's own choice of time.

According to "The History of Oshima", it is stated to fall on the 19<sup>th</sup> of the 9<sup>th</sup> month (lunar calendar) while the "Customs of the Yoronjima" states that it falls on either the 27<sup>th</sup> or 29<sup>th</sup> of October.

Villages in the area spanning from Nesebu to Yamato in Naze City as well as other areas usually hold the practice on the Shikari(eve) of the Donga while areas such as Chinase where the Kanesaru is celebrated, conduct reburials on the Shikari (eve) of the Kanesaru.

The digging of the grave is done by close relatives (grandchildren, nephews and etc) of the deceased, switching places with the deceased's children and siblings time to time till the remains are unearthed.

As it is taboo to expose the bones to sunlight, an umbrella is used to cover the hole when the bones are close to being unearthed. The unearthed bones are passed to a woman standing by the side under an umbrella (usually the deceased's daughter).

At the end of the ceremony of the washing of the bones, the family returns home to celebrate the purifying and cleansing of the deceased.

## 9<sup>th</sup> day of the 9<sup>th</sup> month

It is the ceremony held to pray for one's health held on the 9<sup>th</sup> of the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year.

It is also known as the Festival of Choyo, where it is one of the 5 main festivals as according to the Yin-Yang philosophy of China.

Thanks for answered prayers are offered and new prayers are made.

The holy wine is made on the previous day.

Thanks are offered in the morning, while prayers are made in the evening.

For the former, holy wine and simmered foods of fish and vegetables are offered while 3 Sho and 3 Go (approx. 1.98 litres) of rice and shochu (distilled spirits) are offered for the latter.

While prayers offered at home are known as Yaagwan, those offered at temples are known as Teragwan and those offered at the beaches are known as Hamagwan.

The fruitful harvest obtained in the previous year, as well as the disaster-free year is seen as the answering of their prayers by the gods.

## **Muchimore (pronounced as moo-chi-moe-ray)**

It refers to the receipt of mochi rice cakes.

Children and youths dress up in costumes and dance to each household to receive Kacha rice cakes, rice cakes made by steaming a mixture of rice flour, sugar and sweet potatoes wrapped in shell ginger leaves.

It is widely practised in the islands of Amami Oshima and Tokunoshima.

As it is held from the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year to the Kanesaeru of the 10<sup>th</sup> month in some parts of northern Amami Oshima, this festival is also known as the Kanesaru or the Taneoroshi.

Taneoroshi used to refer to another act entirely, but gradually it came to refer to a combined act and has been since used till the present times.

It is however known as Jukatamu in Ashikebu of the city of Naze, and as Tanemuchi, Muchitabori and Akimuchi in the southern parts of Oshima Island and Tokunoshima Island.

At Kaminomine of the Tokushima Island, the youths would obtain rice cakes from the various households by tossing pebbles known as Kuganeishi (literally meaning gold in Japanese) into the gardens while singing "Remembering the times of feasting with brothers faraway, remembering the times of merry-making with brothers nearby. Please exchange this Kugane with mochi (rice cakes)."

In Inutabu of Isen-cho, the youths hold up a straw figure known as "Isanbo" at the head of the procession.

The start of the Muchimore festival differs across the region, with it being held during June in Doren of Setouchi-cho while it is celebrated on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the Obon month (August) in Tete of the Tokunoshima Island.

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