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[Special Topics]

Akina: An Ecocultural Portrait of an Island Community through the Photographic Lens of Futoshi Hamada

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Abstract

In this photo essay, we take you on a visual journey to Akina Village in Amami Ōshima, Japan, through the work of Futoshi Hamada, an award-winning island photographer and ecologist. Based on the artist's *Mura* (2001) photographic work that documented the natural cycle of the village's rice cultivation and the harvest festivals associated with it, we aim to explore the concept of the island's ecocultural identity as it manifests through the artist's and the community's unique connection with the island nature and culture. As Akina is the last remaining village on the island where rice cultivation is still taking place, and linked to the harvest festivals, the visual documentation of these practices provides us a rare glimpse into what was once an integral part of Amami's natural, socio-cultural, and spiritual/animistic islandscape before sugarcane was imposed on the islanders by mainland Japanese agricultural interventions and impositions.

Keywords

Amami Islands, Mura, Futoshi Hamada, ecocultural identity, communicative ecology, visual storytelling

Introduction

> *Rice field in the middle, a village is stuck to it. You could say that we live at the foot of the mountain to keep the rice fields alive. Forest, river, village and sea are all connected by water, and this has continued endlessly.* (Hamada 2001, 154)

> *Our social and cultural lenses shape the way we see and relate to each other and the rest of the planet. But our identities have not only social and cultural foundations and ramifications, but ecological ones as well.* (Milstein in Knight 2020)

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> *Communicative meaning 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, 75)

This visual essay is as much about an island community as it is about an island photographer and what naturally binds them together, their strong sense of an island ecocultural identity. In creating it, we have chosen to see the communicative islandscape through the physical and metaphorical lenses of ecology and culture. Here, we pay tribute to the artist's work and its contribution to the islands' communicative ecology landscape by focusing on his "*Mura*/Village" (2001) photographic portfolio that follows the life cycle of Akina Village through its rice cultivation and harvest festivals of *Shochogama* and *Hirasemankai*. The photographer, Futoshi Hamada, a well-known Amamian visual storyteller, provides us with a photographic ecocultural portrait of an island community that documents with love, reverence, and care the interaction between the human inhabitants and the "more-than-human world" (Abram 2017) of this village while paying respect to the nature that contains them and provides for their multiple levels of sustenance. As a result, he leaves us with an important, albeit poignant, visual legacy as by doing so, he also documents, as an island storytelling agent, one of the last remaining Amami communities that still practices rice cultivation, which has enabled in its turn the meaningful continuation of the harvest festivals, rich embodiments of the Amami ecocultural identity. Hamada acts, thus, as a custodian of the island's ecocultural practices that were once a fundamental part of the Amamian life.

In this visual essay, we are taking a curating approach to Hamada's work by providing a background context to the village and the island it is located in, as well as its visual storyteller. This is not because we believe the photos need interpretation for our readers, for the photographer has already done this through his lens. Visual images, like all representations, "are never innocent or neutral reflections of reality. . . they re-present for us: that is, they offer not a mirror of the world but an interpretation of it" (Midalia 1999, 131). Hamada's photos reflect his interpretation of Akina through the lens of a shared island ecocultural identity, where the natural and the cultural have long co-existed in a symbiotic manner. It is worth noting here that the Amami Islands' ecological footprint is of substantial importance given the ongoing efforts to have them recognized as a UNESCO Natural Heritage site along with their fellow Ryukyu Islands in the south. The Akina community and its photographer thus sit in a deeply rich ecological island context.

The images in visual essays can originate from a range of sources, an image collection, for example, that is already available such as a curated collection or an image archive (*Visual Communication* submission guidelines). This essay contains selected photos from Hamada's *Mura* portfolio, made available to us by the photographer, which focuses on the theme of the rice cultivation cycle accompanied by his reflections and, in some cases, background information. At the start of our journey, we simply wanted to provide a space for this work to stand alone with some background context; however, as we dived into

Hamada's visual *Mura* world and started drawing on the concept of ecocultural identity, we moved into a "hybrid space" that ended up with this "in between" piece, half article, half visual essay. Tempted as we were to agree with Goodman's position against Barthes', who claimed, "the meaning of images is always related to, and in a sense, depended on verbal text" (Barthes 1967, quoted in Kress and van Leewen 2006, 17), we had to acknowledge that visual language is culturally specific. Although to the inhabitants of Akina, and indeed to the rest of Amami Ōshima, Hamada's images do not require interpretation as their ecocultural meaning is shared, readers from outside this island and Japan might appreciate having a more detailed context. However, we believe the photos with their captions and reflections by the photographer can stand on their own.

A Visual Exploration into Island Ecocultural Identity and Communicative Ecology

> *Too often mislabeled an "issue," the environment is in fact integral not just to everything we do but to who we are. This link between our identity and our ecology has long been recognized in many societies, but others seem to have forgotten its signal importance. . . . all identities are ecocultural ones.* (Noel Castree, n.d.)

Castree's review of the Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor edited volume *Ecocultural Identity* (2020) captures the essence at the heart of this volume and Hamada's work, that we humans are not only cultural but also ecological beings. Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor caution us that in placing too much emphasis on sociocultural identity formations, interrelated more-than-human dimensions have been disregarded. We see this also in scholarly research that focuses disproportionately on how human society shapes and is shaped by this identity while hardly acknowledging the shaping capacity of the more-than-human world when reality points at humans and more-than-humans being "always participants in crisscrossing sociocultural and ecological webs of life" (Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor 2020, xvii). For Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor, an "ecocultural identity framework" situates collective and individual ecological affiliations and practices as inseparable from and reciprocally constituted with sociocultural dimensions.

The cultural ecologist David Abram (2020), despairing at the thought that nature is often considered as the "other" of culture ("nature" is out there, "culture" is in here), sought to find a different way of speaking of nature that implies human culture is encompassed by and permeated by, and hence a part of, the wider natural world. Terms like the environment and the Anthropocene tend to locate humans at the centre and seem to imply that human culture's influences on the rest of nature is such that the biosphere is now living within the regime of Anthropos. It was through this yearning for a way of articulating human culture as a subset within the larger set of earthy nature that Abram came to gift us with the now well known "more-than-human world" phrase.

Abram, in his work *The Spell of the Sensuous* (2017), widely considered seminal, argued about the impact of written language on our perception of this more-than-human

world and the importance of oral storytelling traditions. Narrated events, he says, always happen somewhere: "For an oral culture, that location is never merely incidental to those occurrences. The events belong, as it were, to the place, and to tell the story of those events is to let the place itself speak through the telling" (163). Similar to oral storytelling, photographs, as visual storytelling, "taken in a natural setting are grounded though locative circumstances and elements in the background which tie the participants to place" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 71). In his visual presentation of Akina with all its elements and their container of nature, Hamada comes closer to oral storytelling by turning the oral into visual while making little or no attempt to describe it or analyze it through words. His original *Mura* work had indeed very little text. Communicative meaning is affective as Abram is quoted above saying; it resonates with the landscape, and as we will see below, Hamada's visual storytelling resonates with the island landscape that he grew up in.

The way a photo is structured reveals to us not only the relationship between the artist and their work (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 18) but also the place both are contained in and interact with. While Kress and van Leeuwen's approach to visual communication starts from a social base, what it is missing is the ecocultural connection. The meanings thus expressed by a photographer are not only first and foremost social meanings, which arise out of the society, but also the natural environment that contains it, acknowledging, thus, its importance in place meaning and identity representation. We believe that Hamada brings an island ecocultural identity lens that serves as a reminder that ecological dimensions are inseparable from sociocultural dimensions of selfhood. This lens helps viewers visualize the crossing of what Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor (2020) call culturally constructed borders that separate human, flora, fauna, and environment. Photography as a medium has been linked to ecology (Loori 2000). Hamada's photography shows us a community where neither the human nor nature dominate over the other but co-exist with mutual acknowledgement of each other through various layers of co-presencing and interaction. In this case, the place is a small community on a small island in the south of the Japanese archipelago and of a larger ocean. The communicative ecology of this place is not only intimately connected to but also irrevocably shaped by its islandness.

Baldacchino (2004, 278) tells us that "small islands are special because their 'geographical precision' facilitates a (unique) sense of place." He defines islandness as "an intervening variable" that "contours and conditions physical and social events in distinct, and distinctly relevant ways" (Baldacchino 2005, 35). Small islands are distinctive communities defined by a collective identity and close, reciprocal relationships. Interestingly, in some parts of Japan, the term *shima*, denoting island and community, embodies a dual meaning: islands as geographical features and islands as small-scale social groups where cultural interactions are densely intermeshed (Suwa 2007). This concept not only contributes to putting islandness in its Japanese context but also provides us a useful framework when studying island communicative ecologies and ecocultural identities. Shima could be seen in this case as a unique context within which communicative performances take place and produce communicative ecologies that shape and are shaped by this space

(Papoutsaki and Kuwahara 2018; Konishi and Papoutsaki 2020).

In our earlier ethnographic research on the Amami Islands' communicative ecology (Papoutsaki and Kuwahara 2018), we had defined shima communicative ecologies as the development and accumulation of island communicative performance patterns in various inter-personal, familial, social, cultural, and economic networks. Whilst acknowledging the importance of island geography and natural environment in our Island Communicative Ecology (ICE) approach, the ecology was mostly taken as a metaphor. By using an ecological metaphor, a number of opportunities presented themselves for analyzing island place-based communication. It provided, for instance, a better understanding of the ways island activities are organized, the ways islanders define and experience their island environments, and the implications for social order and organization. The ecological metaphor enabled us at the start to define the boundaries of the island communicative ecology and "to examine how the coherence of that boundary and the stability of each ecology is maintained" (Hearn and Foth 2007, 1). In the context of this essay, the ICE approach needs to strengthen the ecology not only in its metaphorical meaning but in actual terms. Thus, the original definition of ICE would now need to bring into sharper focus the role of the natural ecology in place meaning, forms, networks, systems, activities, interconnections, resources, flows, and issues distinctive to islands. It would also need to refer more clearly to the context of nature in which communication processes occur and contain the ecological identity of participants and how this shapes and is shaped by the topics of communication and the ways in which things are communicated. Lastly, when describing the island storytelling agents as part of the island's communicative ecology, their ecocultural identity needs to come to the fore and be acknowledged as a defining element in the way they express their islandness.

Futoshi Hamada: Amami Islands' Visual Storyteller

Hamada is an established and important figure in the Amami Islands' communicative ecology landscape. He plays an integral role in the islands' storytelling networks as an artist/storytelling agent (Papoutsaki and Kuwahara 2018). An Amami Ōshima native, known best for his *Amami-no-kurousagi* (Black Rabbit of Amami) work, Futoshi Hamada was born in 1953 and grew up in Yen Village, a community close to Akina Village. After graduating from Tokyo College of Photography (Tokyo Polytechnic University) in 1975, he worked for Kodansha Photo Department before he became a freelance photographer. In 1980, he returned to Amami Ōshima and continued to take pictures of its nature and people, something for which he developed a passion and became known. In 1986, he started to take photos of the Black Rabbit, a special island natural treasure, which required spending large amounts of time observing them in their natural habitat, one that is full of dangers given that Amami Ōshima is known for its *habu* (venomous snake). All this resulted in a large portfolio that includes numerous publications and TV program productions with NHK and TV Asahi, culminating in the 2017 Smithsonian's Nature Best Pho-

tography Asia Award—Video Section for his work "Child Rearing of Amami Rabbits." Hamada's photography was also an integral component of the award-winning *Horizon* magazine, the only Amami Islands locally produced publication that his wife Yuriko Hamada edited for two decades. The Hamada couple have a long-standing record of serving the islands' agency by generating island stories from within (Papoutsaki and Kuwahara 2018).

In our multiple encounters with Hamada, his passion for his art was evident, but above all, it was his deep love for the islands' nature and culture that has fueled this passion. He calls himself an Amami Islands photographer and ecologist, a Black Rabbit expert, and he carries this identity with a strong sense of responsibility. His *Mura* work was the result because he recognised the importance of documenting a part of the island's ecocultural identity that is almost lost:

> *If I want to see the Amami-like village in my heart, Akina is the only village in Amami [. . .] where rice cultivation and festivals are integrated. I realized how important 364 days were in understanding the festivals while I was doing my fieldwork. Though there are many books that explain the festivals, there is no book that talks about the everyday life of the people.* (Hamada 2001, 157)

While his original intention was to document the harvest festivals, he quickly realised that these culturally embodied manifestations of the island's identity were linked to rice cultivation and the village's annual life cycle.

> *Because of the policy of reducing acreage under cultivation since the late 1960s, many farmers converted from rice to sugarcane. Before that, rice fields were everywhere. The reason why Akina Village didn't stop rice cultivation was in the idea that you cannot stop what you inherited from your parents. They might have thought that they cannot stop rice cultivation because of these festivals, or that they cannot stop the festivals because of rice cultivation. I wish I could express the village in a way that you can imagine what is in the hearts of the villagers.* (Hamada 2001, 160)

Hamada recalls when the Duke of Edinburgh came to Amami in 1984, which led to the establishment of the Amami Environment Research Organization (AERO), "The Duke's visit to the island was an opportunity to change how people looked at nature. That is, the idea that everything resonates in nature and is incorporated into the providence of nature" (Hamada 2001, 160).

In explaining how he came to embark on his *Mura* project, Hamada allows us to see the strong "ecocultural ethics" that define and guide him as an Amamian artist and island storyteller.

> *I saw the festivals of Akina for the first time in autumn of the year 1980. Though I grew up in the neighboring village, I didn't know that there were such festivals here. I began to take the photos of the festivals simply as a traditional culture. Though I used to go to the village to take photos of the festivals, in 1992, I came to think that I needed to take photos of people's daily life in order to know the festivals better. One day of the festivals needs the other 364*

days. Then, I started going to the village to photograph the daily life of the people. However, in the beginning, village people didn't open their mind, and they felt shy or they hated being pointed at with the camera. Three or four years later, the villagers gradually opened up to me. At that time, I came to feel guilty that I was the only one not covered with mud. Though the villagers got soaked in the rain or got sweaty under the scorching sun, I was only there to take photos of them without getting dirty. How can I feel (like) the villagers? I came to think that I could not feel the villagers if I don't do rice farming myself. Therefore, I decided to cultivate rice in 1997. I felt like I was able to unite my heart to the village people by cultivating rice. I could now know how hard it was. (Hamada 2001, 154–155)

He spent several years returning to Akina to document all these aspects of the community, a commitment that can only come from a deep sense of responsibility towards his island ecocultural heritage.

Akina: *"A Village of All Creation"*

The Amami Islands' communicative ecology has been shaped by their distinctive and diverse geographical, social, and ecocultural environment, which has conditioned their inhabitants' communicative sociality (Papoutsaki and Kuwahara 2018). Although these islands are seen as one group comprising eight inhabited islands,[1] each of them consists of a unique microcosm with distinctive identities.

FIGURE 1. Aerial view of Akina Village (1) (provided by Futoshi Hamada).

Akina Village is located in the northern part of Amami Ōshima, the biggest of these islands, with a port on the north side facing the East China Sea and a small hill surrounding paddy fields on the south side. The village is one of 18 that make up Tatsugo Town in an area that is mostly occupied by mountains with little flat land (Editing Committee of Tatsugo Town 1988, 45–46). Following the depopulation trend on these islands, Akina in 2019 contained just 362 people with 215 households (Tatsugo Town Hall). In comparison, the population was at its peak in 1984 with 1,479 inhabitants and 341 households (Editing Committee of Tatsugo Town 1988, 127–128).

Akina, in fact, consists of three communities: Sato at the mountain skirt on the west side of the village, Agare on the east side, and Kaneku on the northern sea side. The Akina and Yamada rivers flow through the village and into a sea of coral reefs. One of the best

paddy fields on Amami Ōshima spreads in the downstream area of these two rivers. Akina has attracted a lot of folklore attention over the years because it maintains the old rice cultivation and harvest rituals that invite rice spirits to receive their thanks and are preliminary celebrations for a good harvest. The festivals of Shochogama and Hirasemankai, held every year in August of the lunar calendar, were designated as important intangible cultural properties in 1985.

FIGURE 2. Aerial view of Akina Village (2) (provided by Futoshi Hamada).

In the images of Akina Village (see fig. 1 and 2), we can easily distinguish the *sato*, *satoumi*, and *satoyama* system that is so typical in these Japanese islands. While *sato* represents the flat, inhabited and common-use spaces as well as the arable land, *satoyama* points to the mountainous area right behind the *sato*, with *satoumi* demarcating the seashore that faces the *sato* (Nishimura 2016, 43). *Satoyama* is an area where the environment has been maintained through various human efforts such as agriculture, forestry, and so on. It is a familiar area of nature created by human activities, a mountain where there is an ecosystem influenced by humans as a result of being adjacent to human settlements, a nature that has supported traditional livings, or a nature created by human involvement. In satoyama, there is a model in which human and nature coexist, a mechanism that does not deplete resources, a model of sustainable society. In order to perform the Shochogama ritual, you need woods and rice straw to build a single roof hut (lean-to) called a Shochogama. In Akina Village, forest and paddy fields are maintained and managed so the villagers can get these natural materials to build the hut. In Akina Village, the only place in Amami Oshima that continues to grow rice, satoyama is maintained in order to perform the ritual.

An equally important element of Amami Village life has been social reciprocity. *Yui* is a manifestation of reciprocal relationships and is interwoven into the island communities' social organization seen in such expressions as "lend *yui*" and "return *yui*" (Yamamoto 2001, 754). The villagers voluntarily unite and work together in rice fields during planting and harvesting, re-thatching of straw roofs, and rituals and festivals, as we will see in some of the photos taken by Hamada (Nakatani 2013, 54).

A Visual Journey through Akina's Rice Cultivation Culture and Harvest Festivals

It is important to understand what happened to the rice ecocultural practices of these islands and why Akina's role has been so significant in maintaining them. After the Amami Islands came under the control of the Satsuma Domain in 1609, the much higher price of brown sugar compared to rice led Satsuma to change the tax payment from rice to brown sugar in 1747. This resulted in the expansion of sugarcane fields. However, as sugarcane could only be cultivated on dry land, rice cultivation survived in wetlands, especially as some of the harvested rice was used for the important ritual of Noro. In order to monopolize profits, the Satsuma Domain introduced a brown sugar monopoly system in 1777, making large profits as a result. In 1830, the monopoly system became even more stringent (Naze-shishi Hensan Iinkai Hen 1968, 359–365). And when the policy of reducing acreage under cultivation became enforced in the late 1960s, many farmers converted from rice to sugarcane, so you could say that rice cultivation in the islands became the victim of sugarcane, and along with it, a host of ecocultural practices disappeared or lost their meaningful connection to daily life of island inhabitants.

Planting and Harvesting

FIGURE 3. "The soil gets fragrant": open burning in early spring; grass becomes ash and nourishes the soil, Jan. 1997.

In the paddy fields that have been resting since autumn, weeds are cut and burned, and then paddy field raising begins from mid-January. This picture was taken in an afternoon of mid-January when I happened to come across an opening. . . in Akina Village. The silhouette of the woman doing an open burning happened to be the mother of my alumnus. After harvesting rice in July and August, if the rice is left as it is, a second ear will sprout around September or October, which is called nakabo *in Amami and* hikobae *(basal shoot) on the mainland. After harvesting the second ear, the rice field is left as it is, and the grass grows wild. Then, the grass is mowed and burned again. Rice planting starts around the end of March. January is the time to prepare for rice planting. The grass is mowed in the paddy fields with a mower and burned in the open, and the ash becomes fertilizer. In each rice field, an open burning was done to prepare for rice planting. When I took this picture, I intended to dynamically take the soft volumes of the smoke. Because I focused on smoke in an attempt to express the texture and strength of the smoke, the person became a silhouette. Because rice production starts from here, this photo has a profound feeling. . . . It's wintertime, so the sun is falling south and it's backlit. The cut grass is still blue, so it contains a lot of water, and there is no flame but a lot of smoke. The woman is burning grass . . . with a stick. Open burning is not fixed as a woman's work. It is done by every rice field owner. While in rice planting and harvesting, labor is lent and borrowed without using money, which is called yuiwaku; open burning and the preparation are done by the owners themselves. . . . I intended to show the seasonal change by the title "The soil gets fragrant."* (Hamada 2001, 1)

FIGURE 4. "Seed paddy soaked in water sprouts" Feb. 1997.

Some of the rice harvested the previous year is set aside for seeding, and the seed paddy is soaked in water to germinate. The work to make a nursery and to put water in the paddy field and stir it is done in parallel. . . . I went to Akina to take photos of the festivals every year, but around 1992, I began to notice that if you only take pictures of festivals, it won't be enough to make a photobook. (Authors' interview with Hamada)

FIGURE 5. The paddy fields of Akina are a valuable feeding ground for grey-faced buzzards spending the winter in Amami, Feb. 1997.

Migratory birds such as the grey-faced buzzard flying to the islands to see the winter through know that insects sleeping in the soil would wake up and start gathering and working around the rice fields. I knew grey-faced buzzards. . . from my childhood. Akina Village attracted many kinds of birds because of the rice fields. . . . There used to be a lot of loach and diving beetle in the paddy fields, but now no more because of pesticides. (Authors' interview with Hamada)

FIGURE 6. Egrets know that insects are awakened by rice paddy plowing, Feb. 1997.

FIGURE 7. Smoothing the paddy fields manually using a wood plank, April 1996.

FIGURE 8. Sowing the paddy with seeds on a cool rice nursery that will become seedlings in about 30 days in a cool nursery seed paddy, March 1997.

Sowing the seeds on a seedbed and growing seedlings until hand-planting size is different to machine planting, which results in much shorter seedlings.
When I was taking photos of Akina people, I was disliked at first. It took about two years before they behaved naturally in front of my camera. I asked permission from a village head, and when my seriousness was understood, I was first accepted by him and later by the villagers. (Authors' interview with Hamada)

FIGURE 9. Seedlings growing beautifully in early April 1998.

To prevent seedlings from being eaten by wild birds, a net is put up on the seedlings as a protective measure. Around the time from the end of March to early April, it's been raining almost nonstop. This time is the most suitable for rice planting, and villagers help plant each other's rice seedlings through lending and borrowing labor called yuiwaku. (Authors' interview with Hamada)

FIGURE 10. Seedlings with family, April 1998.

Around this time, it has been continuously raining since the end of March. . . . In my childhood, we were asked to help with rice planting. Until seedlings take root, we need rainfall. As the work under the scorching sun gets tiring, it's easier to work in the rain. (Authors' interview with Hamada)

FIGURE 11. Carrying seedlings in a cart, April 2000.

FIGURE 12. “Rice planting was hard but fun,” Ms. Masu laughed happily, April 1995.

Ms. Masu is Ms. Masu TABATA. She is the one who faithfully follows what her father-in-law has taught her. Since the Takakura storehouse behind the trees was demolished in 1995, we can no longer see this kind of scene now. (Authors’ interview with Hamada)

In the old days, there was no choice but to read nature. The village people have orally passed down the experience of their ancestors for generations. For example, the old woman who appears here learned and has stubbornly followed the customs of the house from her father-in-law, who was the head of his family when she came as bride of his son. However, she said that this would be over for them. They have a great sense of crisis that such accumulation of experience would be lost. What I can do as a photographer is to leave it for posterity in the form of a photo book. (Hamada 2001, 155)

FIGURE 13. Pinch 4 or 5 seedlings and plant them at regular intervals, April 1996.

> *Stretch the rope and line up in an orderly manner to plant rice. The rope is wrapped around stakes on both sides and shifted little by little.* (Authors' interview with Hamada)

FIGURE 14. The work proceeded silently in a thunderstorm, April 1996.

This photo was taken during a thunderstorm. Rice seedlings are planted in a neat arrangement. Eleven people were transplanting rice seedlings. Even if you wear a raincoat, you get wet, still not so tiring compared to working under the scorching sun. Those who finished earlier take a rest while waiting for the others to finish.
The bundles of seedlings were scattered in advance. (Authors' interview with Hamada)

FIGURE 15. Rain during the time for rice planting is best for seedlings to grow, April 1994.

It rains a lot from late March to April, which is suitable for rice planting. Rice harvesting ends before the typhoons arrive. Rice planting and harvesting are done by reading the area's nature well. (Hamada 2001, 156)
The long rain from late March to early April, when the rapeseed blossoms bloom, is called "rapeseed rainy season."

FIGURE 16. “Eating lunch on the ridge is delicious,” April 1996.

The women in the family of the paddy field owner prepare the lunch before noon and bring it to eat together. (Authors’ interview with Hamada)

FIGURE 17. The sound of the cultivator echoes in the fresh, green mountain, April 1995.

FIGURE 18. Carrying seedlings; paddy ridges are slippery, April 1996.

> *Paddy ridges are maintained every year. The grass on the ridges is shaved off with a hoe, and then the mud from the paddy field is scooped up with a hoe and rubbed against the ridges to repair them*. (Authors' interview with Hamada)

FIGURE 19. Migratory bird looking for food among growing seedlings, April 1995.

> *In this village that faces nature, one of the teachings that the elderly people have cherished is the idea that instead of doing whatever we want with nature, we need to be self-regulating.* (Hamada 2001, 159)

FIGURE 20. Akina Village's paddy fields just planted, April 1995.

FIGURE 21. Growing rice, May 1994.

The paddy field 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. While the paddy field is the one that always goes back and forth between the animal and human sides, the interesting part of the village is that it gives them a place to take turns in their leading role. (Authors' interview with Hamada)

FIGURE 22. The rethatching work on Takakura storehouse is very rarely practiced now, March 1995.

> *Takakura Storehouse is assembled with only wood, bamboo, and thatch, and no nails are used. The Takakura storehouse is a gem of the wisdom of our predecessors.* (Hamada 2001, 9)

> *Many private houses used to have thatched roofs. Each house has its roof rethatched every few years. . . . This work eventually leads to the Shochogama festival. In this festival, the important point is not on the festival day, but on the preparation itself before the festival, that is, the technical tradition of thatched roofing. This festival also has the role of handing down the technology to the young people. Since this is a difficult task and thatched roofs are vulnerable to typhoons, . . . storehouses are disappearing steadily.* (Authors' interview with Hamada)

FIGURE 23. Wrapping a straw rope around the leg and stepping on it with full power to tighten the thatch, March 1995.

FIGURE 24. "Offering peach twigs and mugwort at a coral-rock tomb," April 1996.

March 3 of the lunar calendar, which is April of the new calendar, is the festival of peaches. By this time, rice planting is almost finished. Villagers rest their bodies and go clamming at the sea on this day. On the spring tide day, coral reefs appear on the surface of the sea. Villagers catch shellfish and fish in the gaps between corals and rocks. In the old days, village people were mostly poor, so they used to take coral rocks from the sea and use them as tombstones. (Authors' interview with Hamada)

FIGURE 25. “If you don’t go out to the sea on March 3, you will become an owl,” an old woman said with a laugh, April 1995.

According to Hamada, March 3 of the lunar calendar is a women’s festival, and it is the day of the spring tide. On that day, people used to go to the sea and purify themselves by soaking in seawater and pray for their health. Even now, the custom of praying for good health for newborn babies by immersing their feet in seawater on March 3 of the lunar calendar is practiced. Owls (crows in some areas) are considered spooky or evil.

FIGURE 26. On the biggest tide day of the year, beautiful coral reefs appear on the surface of the sea, May 1995.

> *The village is the point of contact with not only the forest but also the sea through the river. The village is thus seen as being at an intermediate point between these natural elements. Amamians followed the Ryukyuan tradition of the* Neriya Kanaya *and practiced the ritual of praying for a good harvest by inviting the god from beyond the sea. This is the faith in the sea. The blessings of the rich sea also moisten the village.* (Hamada 2001, 158)

FIGURE 27. Ryukyu keelback looking for food, May 1995. (Less toxic than the feared habu, it prefers to eat frogs and lizards.)

FIGURE 28. Lycaenidae sucking the nectar of violet wood-sorrel on the footpath between rice fields, May 1995.

FIGURE 29. The ruddy kingfisher was here again this year and cried out, announcing an early summer, May 1997.

The ruddy kingfisher is a summer bird that flies from Southeast Asia to the islands for breeding. It is called kukkaru *in Amami, and it tweets in the morning from spring to summer. The ruddy kingfisher often became the painting subject of Isson Tanaka, a famous Japanese painter of Amami Island's natural world.*[2] (Authors' interview with Hamada)

FIGURE 30. Welcoming the spirits, July 1995.

> *In an era when typhoons couldn't be predicted and you could only read the wind, I think that people would have felt the powerlessness of humans. In those times, there would be no choice but to pray to ancestors who have returned to nature. There are wishes and gratitude in the prayers. And I feel the greatness of the soil because it gives us a harvest from where there was nothing*. (Hamada 2001, 158)

FIGURE 31. Harvesting, July 1996.

Though the festivals and rice cultivation are integrated, if rice cultivation is gone and only the festivals remain, the village would gradually lose its energy. Therefore, I want them to continue rice cultivation even as a learning opportunity for children. The villagers have built a community by lending and borrowing labor called Yuiwaku *or* Yui *from way back. I want the children to learn such a system too.* (Hamada 2001, 158)

FIGURE 32. A face full of joy of a good harvest, July 1997.

Mr. Tsuchiyama carrying ripe rice plants. Rice cultivation, which started with preparing rice fields in mid-January, finally reaches the harvest, being grown with great care until the harvest in July. The result is the outcome of climate and efforts such as daily management. This year's result appeared in his smiling face. (Authors' interview with Hamada)

FIGURE 33. Children helping with harvest, July 1996.

> *Everyone has memories of coming into contact with rice fields and nature as a child, and that is my starting point. I think that we have nurtured creativity by getting in touch with nature. The very place was a rice field.* (Authors' interview with Hamada)

FIGURE 34. Drying rice, July 1995.

FIGURE 35. Carrying dried rice stalks, July 1996.

FIGURE 36. Threshing together, July 1996.

FIGURE 37. New harvest, July 1995.

FIGURE 38. At the village rice mill, August 1999.

The Harvest Festivals: An Embodiment of Gratitude for Nature's Gifts

> *For much of humans' time on the planet, before the great delusion, we lived in cultures that understood the covenant of reciprocity—that for Earth to stay in balance, for the gifts to continue to flow, we must give back in equal measure for what we are given. Our first responsibility, the most potent offering we possess, is gratitude.* (Kimmerer 2014, 18)

Kimmerer, a Native American of Potawatomi ancestry, believes that humans used to live in cultures that understood the covenant of reciprocity, which calls first and foremost for gratitude. Giving thanks to the gifts of nature, she says, implies not only a recognition of the gift (the rice as we have seen in the case of Akina Village), but also of the giver, the nature that acts as a vessel of life for this community (the satoyama space where humans and nature co-exist). Festivals can help us "understand the cultural geographies of particular localities" (Mackley-Crump 2012, quoted in Johnson 2015, 107), while festival sites can be seen as "contact zones that reveal not only the content of the performances on display but also meaning that is embedded in the purpose of the events in the first place" (Johnson 2015, 18). One way of understanding festivals is through their hosting community and the perceived benefits and impact to the island life and identity (Papoutsaki and Stansfield 2019). Akina's harvest festivals of Shochogama and Hirasemankai stand as an embodiment of gratitude, a ceremony, a ritual, an act of practical and creative reverence, in songs, in dances, in music, in stories of past and present shared and woven together into a continuum that gifts back to the community its ecological and cultural well-beingness.

In Akina, the Shochogama and Hirasemankai festivals are held on the day of *Arasetsu*, an event equivalent to the New Year according to the production calendar of the Amami Islands. *Arasetsu* means the first festival, which is on the first *hinoe* (the third sign of the Chinese calendar) of August. Six days after Arasetsu is the day of *mizunoe* (the ninth sign), called "*Shibasashi,*" and the day of *kinoene* after *shibasashi* is called *Donga*.[3] These three events are called *Mihachigatsu* (New August), and a seasonal event (Summer New Year) is held in each village. Summer New Year, called *Natsu Shogatsu,* is only celebrated in Amami Ōshima. The New Year on the South Islands (The Ryukyu Islands and the Amami Islands) was in August of the lunar calendar. Rice was sown in October and was ripe and harvested in June of the lunar calendar (July of the new calendar). If rice cultivation on the mainland was summer, rice cultivation on the Amami Islands was winter, and this is deeply related to *Mihachigatsu,* or New August, and the three festivals of Arasetsu, Shibasashi, and Donga are held several days apart (Ono 1977, 241).

The day before Arasetsu is *Sukari,* which means preparation or the eve of festival. In general, on the evening of Arasetsu, the August dance begins at a house on the edge of the village as the starting point and continues in the garden of each house overnight. On the day of Arasetsu and the next day, ancestors are enshrined and given offerings at each house. In the evening, dancing is continued around the remaining houses (Naze-shishi Hensan Iinkai Hen 1968, 359–365). On the day of Arasetsu, Akina Village holds Shochogama in the early morning and Hirasemankai in the evening, and then people per-

form the August dance, so the Arasetsu of Akina Village is different from the Arasetsu of other villages. On the day of *Sukari*, women give offerings at the porch of the drawing room. The offerings include steamed rice with red beans, called *kasiki,* and a drink called *miki* that is made of rice and fermented sweet potatoes (Tatsugo-choshi Minzoku-hen Hensan Iinkai 1988, 795).

FIGURE 39. Offerings (1): The evening before the festival, Sept. 1997.

FIGURE 40. Offerings (2): The evening before the festival, Sept. 1997.

In order to live with peace of mind while being self-sufficient in the limited area of the village, people had no choice but to pray for good health and a good harvest by food offerings and praying to nature and ancestors every day. Shochogama and Hirasemankai are the biggest prayer days of the year for nature. Also, Shochogama and Hirasemankai are Shinto rituals to thank the gods for the successful harvest this year and to ask for a good harvest and no illness next year. (Hamada Dec. 2020, communication with the authors)

The Arasetsu event of Akina has been handed down as a ritual for thirteen centuries. Though it was disrupted during and after World War II, it was resurrected by the Akina Arasetsu Event Preservation Society in the 1960s. In contrast to the past practice where people went around to houses and danced through the night and did Shochogama at the dawn of Arasetsu, today the event of Shochogama starts in early morning. While in the past the festivals were held separately in each island village, Shochogama is now held only by Akina and Ikusato Villages by turns every year, and Hirasemankai is held by the Preservation Society of Hirasemankai. Shochogama and Hirasemankai were designated as a national important intangible cultural property in 1985, and their preservation has been overseen by the Preservation Society.[4]

The Shochogama Festival: Calling the Rice Spirits

> *People in old times always sharpened their five senses to prevent the rice from being eaten by insects or from getting a disease. I think that they couldn't do rice farming without having the ability to read nature. Therefore, the more rice you grow, the more you come to know the fear and blessings of nature. I think this would be the reason why you have to pray, and thus, these festivals were created.* (Hamada 2001, 155)

The festival for harvest thanksgiving and the good harvest prayer held in the early morning of the day of Arasetsu is mainly performed by men. Shochogama is also the name of the thatched, single-roof hut (lean-to) built on a hill facing the village. On the day of the festival, before down, village men climb the steep hillside overlooking the rice fields, where a single thatched-roof hut of six meters square is built. This is where baby boys born after the Arasetsu of the previous year are brought in the early morning to step on the roof and pray for their growth. Following this, the *guji*, the chief male priest of a Shinto shrine, recites a prayer that invites the rice sprits, and then village men go up to the roof and shake the hut while singing Shochogama songs to the *chijin* (a traditional drum) and call rice spirits. After the singing, they shake down the roof while calling out "*yora mera*" and then perform the *Hachigatsu Odori*, the August dance, in a circle on the collapsed roof while giving thanks for this year's good harvest and wishing for next year's good harvest. The festival reaches its peak when the sun rises in the eastern mountains (Tatsugo-choshi Rekishi-hen Hensan Iinkai 1988: 560–561, 607–614; Tatsugo-choshi Minzoku-hen Hensan Iinkai 1988, 140, 152–155).

FIGURE 41. Making a thatched, single-roof hut (lean-to) for the Shochogama festival/handing down thatching technology, Sept. 1994.

FIGURE 42. The completed Shochogama, Sept. 1995.

FIGURE 43. Before dawn, village men gather and sing to announce the beginning of the Shochogama festival, Sept. 1997.

FIGURE 44. The sound of drums called Chijin echoes throughout the village, Sept. 1994.

If rice cultivation is stopped, the significance of the festivals would be forgotten. You can see the joy of welcoming the festival for the first time when you put the fir in the storehouse. Therefore, if you don't cultivate rice, the joy won't spring up. The festivals come after rice cultivation is over. A sense of accomplishment after the festivals will lead to the desire to work hard for next year. I think rice is more than food. (Hamada 2001, 158)

FIGURE 45. Only newborn babies, girls before menarche, and men can get on the Shochogama and shake the roof yelling "*yora mera,*" September 1994.

I saw the heart of making things at the festival of Shochogama. Elderly people and children are working while interacting between generations. I feel more energy in the preparation stage than on the day of the festival. At this age, I feel not only gratitude for living but also, I think, for my role in this area. (Hamada 2001, 157)

FIGURE 46. The hut has to be collapsed before sunrise by shaking on the roof while calling "*yora mera,*" Sept. 2000.

FIGURE 47. After collapsing the hut, the August dance starts on the roof, Sept. 1999.

The Hirasemankai Festival: Calling for the Gods beyond the Sea

While Shochogama is primarily performed by men at dawn up on a hill, Hirasemankai is led mainly by women on the western coast at high tide in the evening of the day of Arasetsu. Out of the three rocks standing away from the shore, the rock farthest off the coast is called "*Kami* (god) *Hirase,*" the one in the middle is called "*Merabe* (female) *Hirase*," and the one closest to the village is called "*Inga* (male) *Hirase*." Hirasemankai is held on the rocks of Kami Hirase and Merabe Hirase. The five *noro*[5] women (mediums), dressed in white, stand on the Kami Hirase rock, and the seven men and women (three guji and four *shitowagi* (the noros' assistants) stand on the Merabi Hirase rock and take turns singing songs while repeating the gesture of beckoning the rice spirits that matches the rhythm of the noros' *chijin* drums, inviting the gods from beyond the sea and praying for a good harvest and good catch. The lyrics sung in the Hirasemankai celebrate the joy of harvesting by preparing lots of special treats using products harvested from their farmlands (Tatsugo-choshi Minzoku-hen Hensan Iinkai 1988, 92–93). After that, the August dance starts in a circle on the Merabi Hirase rock while the noros on the Kami Hirase rock worship with both hands towards the sea. After the prayer, they step down from the rock, dance together with the village people, and celebrate a good harvest (Tatsugo-choshi Rekishi-hen Hensan Iinkai 1988, 562–563, 607–614; Tatsugo-Choshi Minzoku-hen Hensan Iinkai, 155–157).

FIGURE 48. *Noros* (mediums) inviting the rice spirits from Neriyakanaya beyond the sea, alternating between singing and beckoning, and praying for a good harvest and safety, Sept. 1997.

Neriyakanaya is the world beyond the sea from where gods bring good harvests and happiness. Akina Village's Hirasemankai is the ritual that invites the god of fertility from the world of Neriyakanaya beyond the sea. This ritual is now practiced only at Akina Village. Thus, Hamada called Akina Village the people of Neriyakanaya.

FIGURE 49. Village people dance the August dance together with the rice spirits from Neriyakanaya beyond the sea, Sept. 1997.

FIGURE 50. Celebrating with a potluck: after the ritual, village people bring food and drink, and the feast starts, Sept. 1996.

Some Concluding Thoughts

> *The village would have got the energy of creating culture from nature. One could say that Akina Village of Amami Ōshima is one of the few villages where rice farming and festivals are integrated and alive. . . . I have been watching this village for 20 years. In this village, I felt I could capture the significance of the festivals and the commitment of the villagers by taking photos of not only the festivals but also the entire rice cultivation process.* (Hamada 2001, 164–165)

And so we wondered along with Hamada if it was the rice cultivation that ensured the continuation of the harvest festivals, or the need to keep the meaning to the festivals that have always been linked to the rice cultivation and harvesting that kept the rice cultivation going. David Abram reminds us that human culture is itself "influenced, organized and mediated by many agencies that are not human or of human artifice," for "while our notions of the world may be structured by our particular culture, cultures are themselves structured by the interplay of gravity, winds, waters, and sunlight, by the migratory movements of various animals and the nutritional and medicinal powers of particular plants" (Abram 1997). These two interconnected village activities are undoubtably manifestations of island ecocultural identity, for the harvest festivals are embodying the deep

connection the inhabitants of the village have with their containing nature and daily interaction with it. There are several more themes one can draw on in exploration of this symbiosis between the human and more-than-human world of Akina Village, including a balancing between the female/male energies though the cycles and manifestations of nature and communication with the unseen world of the spirits, but that would require another essay to expand. For now, Hamada's work acts as a reminder that it is only by engaging in mutual co-presencing that the village and its nature come to talk to each other in such embodied ways:

> *It is this that those who consider themselves "post-moderns," along with most moderns, all too often miss: the way whole civilizations draw their style from the lands that support them, the way human societies are secretly sustained by the bacteria that break down fallen leaves and the worms that churn the soils, and the manifold others—wolves, salmon, ravens, thunderstorms, buffalo, bumblebees—that draw us humans into interaction with them, and so induce us to speak, to dance, to create stories and to weave images, to create culture. Our ideas of nature and the wild are profoundly influenced by our culture, yes, but culture itself is under the influence of a much more-than-human field of forces.* (Abram 1997)

Engaging with Hamada's work, Abram's invitation to open up to the experience of "depth ecology" also comes to mind. For when we acknowledge that we are a part of something so much bigger and complex than ourselves, he says, when we affirm that our own life is entirely continuous with the life of the rivers, the sea, and the forests, that the intelligence of the more-than-human world is deeply enmeshed with ours, we can open up to a new, and perhaps also very old, as the ecocultural practices in Akina tell us, sense of the sacred (see Depth Ecology by Abram 2005).

Anja Claus (2014) argues that one of the consequences of environmentalism, especially through the discipline of geography, is that "the language used to describe earth's places focuses on a discourse that breaks down the limitless elements of place, merely analysing and defining these components instead of connecting, interweaving, and comprehending the otherness and un-knowable aspects of place" (45). Small islands are often seen as bounded and controlled areas of space reflecting concepts of setting limits on and confining. Claus herself falls victim to this language about islands despite her protestations, for she uses the island stereotypical metaphor when she says that by setting these rigid limits, place falls victim to being identified "as an island unto itself, one that is independent of and exclusionary to those 'outside' of this or any place." We can forgive her in this case and chose to focus on the essence of her argument, which is her call to "eliminate the validity of nature's existence outside of ourselves." Perhaps that's where oral and visual storytelling can come to the rescue, offering inclusive ways of referring to the human and more than human world, as Abram tells us that storytelling is always locative. Hamada's visual language transcends these linguistic barriers by offering us an image of the human and more-than-human world as one, braided together, as Claus describes it (2014, 46), in a manner perhaps akin to thatching the roof.

Presencing, a blending of presence and sensing introduced by Otto Scharmer

(Scharmer and Kaeufer 2013) creates in this context an aperture to be in touch not only with the present moment but also sensing the place you are standing in. We could say that the island photographer's visual presencing in this case is both a representation of his artist's inner state and island ecocultural identity and a gift to us as it points at the emerging potential of a Humilocene future (Abram 2020).

This "in between" essay is an attempt to explore ecocultural identities in island communicative ecologies. Undoubtably, it needs further exploration and dialogue with island scholars who engage in island identity and depth ecology studies.

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Notes

1. Amami Ōshima, Kakeromajima, Yorojima, Ukejima, Kikaijima, Tokunoshima, Okinoerabujima, and Yoronjima.
2. Isson Tanaka is often seen as the Paul Gaugin of Japan. Inspired by the sub-tropical Amamian flora and fauna, his paintings reflect a meditative reverence for the unique ecology of these islands (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tanaka_Isson; http://keida.cocolog-nifty.com/photos/uncategorized/2010/06/07/011_640_3.jpg). One can draw some parallels between the work of Hamada and Isson in their visual representation of the islands.
3. In 2020, for instance, the day of Arasetsu was on Sunday, September 20, of the new calendar while the day of Shibasashi was on Saturday, September 26, and the day of Donga was on Tuesday, November 17.
4. About Akina's Arasetsu event: https://www.town.tatsugo.lg.jp/kikakukanko/event-bunka/event/documents/arasetu1.pdf (3/10/2019).
5. For the Ryukyu legacy on the religious culture of the Amami Islands and particularly the *noro* tradition, see Takarabe and Nishimura 2013.

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