

Editorial

The Amami Islands as an Archipelagic Vantage Point

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This special issue, *Amami Islands in Context: Interdisciplinary Insights and Approaches*, emerges at a critical juncture. The 2021 UNESCO World Heritage designation for Amami Ōshima, Tokunoshima, and neighboring Okinawan islands has cast an international spotlight on this archipelago, often framing it through a lens of pristine nature and exceptional biodiversity. While significant, this perspective risks obscuring the complex, dynamic, and often contested human and cultural landscapes that have shaped these islands for centuries. Recent research on the islands' post-UNESCO transformation reveals this tension acutely: as one of the editors of this special issue notes, the designation functions as a double-edged sword that can save the island or accelerate its destruction if mismanaged (PAPOUTSAKI 2025). The contributions in this volume move beyond a monolithic view, instead positioning the Amami Islands as a vital archipelagic vantage point from which to interrogate broader global processes: coloniality and resistance, center-periphery dynamics, cultural resilience, and the intricate relationship between ecological and linguistic ecosystems.

Foundational Contexts

The scholarly foundation for understanding Amami's complex positionality was established through the work of Sueo KUWAHARA and collaborators, whose sustained interdisciplinary research program has made Amami Islands studies a vital field of inquiry. KUWAHARA's (2012) historical analysis of Japan's remote island development policy provides essential context, documenting how the 1953 Remote Islands Development Act and subsequent legislation transformed Amami. This work was extended and deepened through two landmark edited volumes that brought together multidisciplinary perspectives: *The Amami Islands: Culture, Society, Industry and Nature* (KAWAI *et al.* 2013) and *The Islands of Kagoshima: Culture, Society, Industry and Nature* (TAKAMIYA *et al.* 2016). These comprehensive volumes established Amami studies as a field characterized by methodological diversity, spanning anthropology, ecology, linguistics, history, and cultural studies. This infrastructural and sociocultural legacy, as recent ethnographic research

confirms, continues to shape the islands' communicative ecologies and information ecosystems, from the network of tunnels connecting previously isolated communities to the emergence of community FM radio stations that now link diverse island identities (PAPOUTSAKI and KUWAHARA 2018).

Building on this foundational work, the field of Island Studies provides our theoretical framework, urging us to consider islands not as isolated, peripheral laboratories but as active sites of social and cultural production (BALDACCHINO 2006). Recent scholarship has enriched this understanding through concepts of aquapelagic assemblages (HAYWARD 2012) and island pluralities, which emphasize the need to embrace diverse epistemological approaches rather than seeking unified theoretical frameworks (PUGH 2016). As Pugh argues, there is no future of island studies in the singular, but rather futures plural—an acknowledgment particularly relevant to Amami, where multiple, sometimes contradictory identities coexist within and across islands. This theoretical orientation aligns with what STRATFORD *et al.* (2011) term archipelagic thinking, which emphasizes the relational and networked nature of island spaces, attending to both island and ocean, both land and sea, both singularity and multiplicity.

Transperipheral Islands

The Amami archipelago exemplifies this complexity, serving as what NISHIMURA (this issue) terms a transperipheral network (drawing on KUWAHARA *et al.* 2007), where connections are forged directly between peripheries, bypassing or strategically engaging central nodes. Nishimura's analysis of the Tokunoshima International Youth Camp demonstrates how cultural practices like bullfighting (*tōgyū*) can generate durable, periphery-driven frameworks for international collaboration and peace education, challenging conventional center-periphery models. This reflects broader Island Studies scholarship on how islands function as paradigmatic places, topographies of meaning in which the qualities that construct place are dramatically distilled (HAY 2006), and how island communities maintain more varied, diverse, and complicated modes of global engagement than commonly assumed (TERRELL 2004).

Peripheral Agency and Cultural Production

This theme of peripheral agency is further explored through the lens of art history. LOH-KAZUHARA's study of *nihonga* painter TANAKA Isson reveals how an artist, marginalized by the Tokyo-centric art world, developed a transformative visual language in the liminal space of Amami Ōshima. His posthumous ascent to national acclaim, propelled by grassroots efforts, powerfully decenters art historical narratives and illustrates how value and recognition can be constructed from the margins upward, echoing the archipelagic thinking advocated by STRATFORD *et al.* (2011). This bottom-up cultural production finds contemporary expression in the islands' media landscape populated by community FM radio stations, blogging platforms, and cable television operations. These function as what

PAPOUTSAKI and KUWAHARA (2018) identify as island storytelling networks—rhizomatic structures that connect individual and collective agents in producing *shima* (island/community) identity and resilience.

Slow Violence and Epistemic Justice

The celebration of cultural vitality exists alongside narratives of loss and struggle, foregrounding what NIXON (2011) terms slow violence—violence that occurs gradually, out of sight, through environmental degradation and cultural erosion. The contributions by Hanika NAKAGAWA, Satoru NAKAGAWA, and Sandra KOURITZIN poignantly articulate this. Satoru NAKAGAWA and Sandra KOURITZIN reframe Indigenous language (*Shimaguchi*) shift not merely as a symptom of globalization but as a form of epistemic injustice, where colonial education systems taught Shimanchu to treat their language and worldview as garbage. They provocatively argue against standardizing revitalization within capitalist and educational frameworks, proposing instead Indigenous language emancipation as a form of rewilding, allowing the language to adapt and thrive in its evolving ecosystem. This linguistic crisis resonates with broader patterns of what LIBOIRON (2021) identifies as pollution functioning as colonial control—not merely environmental degradation but a systematic severing of Indigenous peoples' relationships with their sustaining environments.

Echoing the loss of Indigenous language is the ecological crisis visible in Amami's biocultural environment and, subsequently, in the island's cultural practices and traditions. ENGLEHARDT et al.'s work documents the existential threat to the Sago Palm population (*Cycas revoluta*, or *Sotetsu* in Japanese) due to the rapid spread of an invasive species, cycad aulacaspis scale (CAS). The historical Sotetsu culture has long been of exceptional cultural and historical significance for the islands, recalling the episode of *Sotetsu jigoku* (Sotetsu hell) in Amami's history when it sustained the islands as a food source in dire times. Through botanical survey, genetic sampling, and ethnographic documentation, the findings show how interventions need to be urgently undertaken to prevent the destruction of a millennia-old biocultural system. Recent research confirms this urgency while documenting how UNESCO designation, despite raising environmental awareness, has introduced new tensions around development that threaten both natural and cultural heritage (PAPOUTSAKI 2025). In pressing upon this urgency, Amami is presented as a frontier, a critical site for island worlds in thinking through these entanglements of heritage and environmental awareness.

Accumulation, Dispossession, and Resilience

This intimate link between land, language, and survival is starkly illustrated in Hanika NAKAGAWA's research on the community of Tokuwase in Tokunoshima. The analysis of water pollution by a mainland sugar corporation is a searing case study of accumulation by dispossession (HARVEY 2005), where the commodification of a communal resource represents both environmental and cultural colonialism. This demonstrates how pollution is

not merely an environmental issue but a tool of colonial control (LIBOIRON 2021), severing the connection between people and their life-sustaining environment. Such cases reveal what recent fieldwork identifies as systemic governance failures, including legal loopholes that remove protected status from heritage areas, enabling unchecked construction (PAPOUTSAKI 2025), exemplified by controversies surrounding hotel developments and grassroots resistance to a proposed 12-story hotel in Setta Village.

Yet, even within these structures of dispossession, Amami communities demonstrate remarkable resilience and creativity. JOHNSON and KUWAHARA's exploration of musicking in an Amami *shōchū* distillery shows how a local business strategically employs both Western classical music (in an audience-less performance for the liquor itself) and a company taiko drum group to build brand identity and foster community. This unique case highlights the complex, often paradoxical, ways global cultural flows are localized and harnessed for both economic and social ends. Similarly, sustainable tourism initiatives, such as certified guide systems and inconvenient but authentic experiences, attempt to balance economic benefits with ecological limits, reflecting what local stakeholders describe as pursuing quality over quantity tourism models to avoid the pitfalls of Okinawa's overtourism (PAPOUTSAKI 2025).

Island Futures: Navigating Complexity

Collectively, these interdisciplinary articles weave a rich tapestry of some of the Amami Islands. They are not a unified whole but a vibrant, sometimes contentious, archipelago of voices and perspectives—a methodological plurality that PUGH (2016) argues is essential for island studies to remain intellectually vital. They show us that to understand Amami—and its distinctive eco-cultural identity—is to understand the ongoing negotiation between periphery and center, between cultural loss and vibrant reinvention, between ecological preservation and the legacies of extractive colonialism. Recent research emphasizes the critical importance of participatory governance, integrated policies that align funding mechanisms with conservation goals, and the framing of preservation as both moral duty and economic asset (PAPOUTSAKI 2025). The choice, as one resident aptly noted, remains whether Amami becomes a postcard or a living home—a balance demanding vigilance, innovation, and collective stewardship.

By grounding our inquiries in the specificities of these islands, we gain not only a deeper appreciation of the Amami archipelago itself but also powerful analytical tools for understanding the dynamics of indigeneity, sustainability, and cultural resilience in island and coastal communities worldwide. The Amami Islands, in their complexity and contradiction, offer a powerful model for an archipelagic study that is both locally grounded and globally relevant—one that embraces, in PUGH's terms, island studies in plural rather than seeking premature theoretical unity. In the wake of accelerating ecological degradation as seen in CAS invasive species impacting local plant bioculture, ongoing linguistic and cultural erosion, competing development pressures following UNESCO designation, and the decentering of mainland Japan art narratives by figures like Tanaka Isson, the stakes of the Amami Islands have never been more urgent.

Note

For more references and research relating to Amami Islands, visit the site of the Amami Islands International Research Network (AIIRN) (<https://www.sicri.net/copy-of-initiatives>).

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