Drinking Sugar's Waste: Pollution and Dispossession in Tokuwase, a Community in Tokunoshima, Japan

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Abstract

With reference to the many-layered colonized Indigenous Amami Archipelago, one local instance of forced Indigenous transition to capitalism, I respond to Federici's call (2004) to revive the memories of collective lives and thereby ensure that the long history of resistance to colonial dispossession stays vibrant. Addressing the research question "how do we frame the rippling effects of the commodification of water in the community of Tokuwase, in Tokunoshima, Japan?" I interrogate one local instance of the enclosure of communal lands and social relations that resulted from the imposition of capitalism. These stories were shared with me by Indigenous Amami Elders who live in Tokuwase, Tokunoshima. In this exemplar, I analyse the road to rural Indigenous dispossession when an extractive company privately owned by capitalists in the mainland of Japan polluted Tokuwase's local spring waters, robbing a community of a communal resource. While making no claim to having established an archetypal route, I work with existing theory to detail steps on the road taken by a variety of actors (some unnamed or unknown) to achieving Indigenous Amami dispossession of lands, waters, and ultimately lives. In keeping with existing theory, I explain how pollution is a tool of colonialism, accumulation by dispossession, and a form of slow violence. I finally gesture towards Indigenous Amami futures framed within and against those who may be accumulating profits from the change in access to water.

Key words: accumulation by dispossession, Amami, capitalism, colonialism, Tokunoshima, water pollution

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Introduction

When writing and presenting about the Amami Archipelago, I must usually first explain where it is and who lives there. Rather than complaining, I am puzzled why such contextual grounding is often omitted in research involving urban locations or studies that assume shared understandings of people, place and ethics, or the safety of human and non-human beings, of time, and of place. But, I digress; such assumptions clearly do not apply to them.

In this paper, I present, with reference to one Indigenous island community, located in a colonized Indigenous Amami geographical space, formerly colonized by the recognized Indigenous Ryukyu Kingdom, one local instance of what Federici (2004) calls the "restudy" of the "transition to capitalism" (Federici 2004: p.6). The island community under study became part of the former Ryukyu Kingdom, beginning in 1429 and culminating in the second dispossession in 1879 (Matsumura 2015). The first dispossession was enacted in 1609 when the Satsuma Domain (modern Japan) annexed and enslaved the Amami archipelago (Matsumura 2015), thereby colonizing the peoples who literally fed the Ryukyu Kingdom. Specifically, the Amami people were food-producing peasants within the Ryukyu Kingdom even before the Kingdom was colonized.

Addressing the research question "how do theories of work and not working frame the rippling effects of the commodification of water in the community of Tokuwase, in Tokunoshima, Japan?", I will illustrate the "enclosure not only of communal lands but of social relations" (Federici 2004: p.5) and the "imposition of a life conceived only in capitalist terms" (Federici 2004: p.5) specifically an instance not of repression and erasure, but of colonial territories being "continuously opened up" (Harvey 2005: p.139). I share with Federici (2004) also the desire to revive the memories of collective lives, and to ensure that the long history of resistance to colonial dispossession stays alive. This paper therefore explores one specific memory shared with me during my master's research by Indigenous Amami elders who live in Tokuwase, Tokunoshima located 1000m inland from the midpoint of Tokunoshima's eastern coast and which had a recorded population of 198 people in 2021 (TokunoshimaTown 2022: p.80). My paper analyzes the process of rural Indigenous dispossession when an extractive company privately owned by capitalists in the mainland of Japan polluted Tokuwase's local spring waters—thereby dispossessing a community of a communal resource. I will examine how pollution is a tool of colonialism (Liboiron 2021) and how what Harvey calls "accumulation by dispossession" (2005: p.144), a form of slow violence (Nixon 2011) have operated, and I will also gesture towards those who may be accumulating profits from the change in access to water. Finally, I will discuss how solutions achieved frame how life is lived.

Method

I conducted fieldwork, including ethnographic interviews with 30 Tokunoshima Island Elders in the summer of 2022. Interviewees included 11 men and 19 women, some individual and others arranged into 15 *Shimatsumugi* sessions held in Tokunoshima Cho,

Amagi-cho, and Isen-cho (Figure 1). Initially I intended to engage "yarning" methods designed for Pacific Islanders' propensity for oral storytelling. However, I soon found that the Elders invited family and friends as if it were an event, suggesting walks or tours, teaching me lessons and demonstrating things, taking the threads of their stories and weaving it into a fabric I call *Shimatsumugi*. I learned that no single method will work within Indigenous communities; even Indigenous methodologies are not transferable from one community to another. *Shimatsumugi* thus represents a collection of localized methodologies that reflect the ways of the universe embodied in Tokunoshima.

The Road to Dispossession Step One: Primitive Accumulation and Slavery to Accumulation by Dispossession

The island of Tokunoshima, having abundant water, mountains, flat land, and rich red soil, is the heart of agriculture in the Amami Archipelago, located in the subtropics of Japan. In the southwest of Tokunoshima is a hilltop community overlooking the ocean called Tokuwase. Tokuwase, like all communities on Tokunoshima, has a long history of being exploited through *sato jigoku* (sugar slavery or sugar hell) dating back to 1609, when the island was conquered by the Satsuma domain until 1868, the Meiji Restoration when power was consolidated in Tokyo and the emperor restored (Nelson 2006, Maeda 2014). Slavery continued under the *Yamato* (the Japanese mainland peoples) rule until 1871 when the Amami Archipelago became a part of a unified Japan (Matsumura 2015) and the Satsuma domain fell, becoming part of the mainland colonialist Yamato. Over time, the *Shimanchu* (that is, "island people" or the Amami people) were liberated from sugar servitude, but they did not have their lands returned to them (Nelson 2006). Consequently, at that point, the stage of "primitive accumulation," specifically referencing the exploitation (and theft) of a physical frontier (Harvey 2005) and slavery as a form of "primitive accumulation" in which the value of individuals' labour accumulates in a given product (Harvey 2003: p.145, Weber 2001: pp.15-16) came to an end.

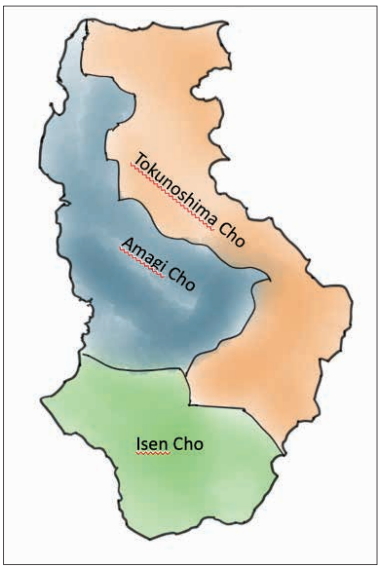

Figure 1. Map of Tokunoshima Island.

The Meiji Reformation and centralization of power marked a transition from primitive accumulation to colonial accumulation through what Harvey (2005) calls a "time-space compression" (p.4), in which new frontiers in "land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution" (2005: p.2) become markets, "by state action if necessary" (2005: p.2) in the same geographical locations multiple times (2005: p.4). Speaking about Indigenous identities in the Philippines, McMurray notes that the first step

in dispossession is identifying what has value. This includes new fields (e.g., intellectual property rights; privatization of water and other necessities that should be guaranteed), new frontiers (e.g., genetic material, seed plasma), and enclosures (e.g., publicly-held universities) that become ripe for accumulation, usually by dispossession (Harvey 2005: p.4). In particular, new intangible frontiers such as Indigenous identities and social norms are identified, leading to what Sockbeson (2017) calls meta-disposession. In this time-space compression, *the commons* is being raided, rather than other nations or individuals; nonetheless, the result of the legislation, frontier creation, and enclosure is that (colonial) capitalists acquire private rights to public benefits—including the right to charge for their use. Li (2009), in fact, asserts that accumulation is the desired result, that policy and regulations are used to achieve rural dispossession in Indigenous and Southeast Asian communities. Tokuwase is both an Indigenous community and located in the south of east Asia.

Rural dispossession functions by colonizing livelihoods; once lands are taken and the commons are commodified, money becomes a necessity and value inheres in people having wage work (Millar 2014, Graber 2018), a reliable source of income, to purchase those commodities. However, the value and valor of a waged job, even those jobs that are not precarious, always comes with constraints (Millar 2014). In the case of Tokuwase, the constraints of agricultural legislation, taxing policies (e.g., Monaghan 2024) and the pollution of water necessitated wage work (e.g., Nakagawa 2023), and were likely responses to globalizing pressures according to Harvey (2005) who identified global neoliberal economics at work in Japan and throughout Asia:

> The new economic configuration—often subsumed under the term 'globalization'—was plucked from the entrails of the old. Volcker, Reagan, Thatcher, and Deng Xaioping all took minority arguments that had long been in circulation and made them majoritarian (though in no case without a protracted struggle). Reagan brought to life the minority tradition that stretched back within the Republican Party to Barry Goldwater in the early 1960s. Deng saw the rising tide of wealth and influence in Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea and sought to mobilize market socialism instead of central planning to protect and advance the interests of the Chinese state. (Harvey 2005: p.2)

Wage work also became valued not only for money but also for status and self-worth (Graber 2018: pp.193-244), even in cases when subsistence agricultural labour would have been more useful and less time-consuming.[1]

These concepts and ideas will be applied to Tokuwase, where dispossession was spearheaded not only by national and regional legislation, but also by the manner in which policies (both existing and emergent) can be seen to support industry and further dispossess Indigenous peoples forcibly subject to them.

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1 Elders participating in my nine-month ethnographic research project (May-July 2022 and September 2022-February 2023) explained that subsistence farming on Tokunoshima only required about 100 days per year of work.

The Road to Dispossession Step Two: Dispossession of a Staple Food

Tokunoshima comprises three administrative units: Amagi-cho, Isen-cho, and Tokunoshima-cho. Each administrative unit on Tokunoshima includes many *shima* (translates as "island", but means "community"), and one township, the center for local government. Each administrative unit on Tokunoshima hosted a sugar cane factory—essentially a processing plant without a final-stage refinery—located outside the township in a local community. All three were owned by the same mainland-owned company, the *Nanseitougyo*. My Ojiichan (grandfather) worked at each of the three sugar cane factories, relocating whenever the *Nanseitougyo* required. From him, I learned that the *Nanseitougyo* is more than a processing plant; it is also involved with cultivation of new sugar cane varieties suitable for the climate, as well as harvesting techniques and collection schedules for the producers, all of this done under the name, and for the profit, of the *Nanseitougyo* who collect the harvested sugar cane to process into black sugar, called kokutou (黒砂糖).[2]

Sugar production was responsible for sugar slavery and was therefore the major crop throughout Tokunoshima under *Yamato* (Japanese mainland) rule, but the staple food needed to sustain life was rice (Monaghan 2024). Wet rice cultivation on Tokunoshima, including in Tokuwase, yielded two annual harvests a year (while in other regions, there can be only one). Taxes were paid by the Tokunoshima Islanders by selling rice and sugar to the *Yamato* mainland. In the 1970s, however, a crop transition was imposed on Tokunoshima through Japanese national legislation regarding so-called 'good' wet rice regions (colder) versus 'poor' regions (warmer); a national narrative of "tasty northern" versus "less tasty southern" rice was fabricated (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). This ultimately led to preventing the purchase of rice grown in most regions of Japan, especially southern regions, including Tokunoshima with even *Shimanchu* officially expressing preference for tasty northern rice.[3] This legislative transition had a ripple effect on the people and landscapes of Tokuwase, which effectively dispossessed them of their staple crop and forcing them into monocropping sugar for cash to purchase rice and other staples.[4] Moreover, the *Nanseitogyou* became a major focus of life, as farmers tried to maximize their yields to gain additional profits, and young schoolboys like my uncle/cousin/big brother[5] Michio Hisaeda who is one of the youngest Elders skipped school during sugarcane harvest to earn cash for piece work, namely heavy physical labour that was unsuited to the older bodies of farmers (also Millar 2014).

Here I must acknowledge positionality in this story of dispossession, to acknowledge what may be read as a form of colonial complicity. My grandfather was the sugar cane

2 Kokuto comes from sugar cane boiled down into a solid form but not further refined into white sugar and molasses. Brown sugar, the product we are familiar with seeing in grocery stores, is sugar and molasses mixed back together. Kokutou, on the other hand, is less processed and considered a healthier sweetener.

3 This expressed preference is from my master's research data and was validated by many Elders.

4 Even though this is not the focus here, there were national law changes forbidding pig husbandry or slaughter at the household level, while the change to sugar rather than rice also mandated that bulls were no longer necessary or permitted at the household level, and increasingly all farmland had to be converted to sugar cane farming—among other changes.

5 This is a very "island" way of referring to our close relationship.

factory manager at Tokuwase, the highest-ranking Indigenous person in the *Nanseitogyou*. He was mainland-educated, innovative, and entrepreneurial, the exact qualities the company would have found desirable in a higher-ranking company official, except that he could not stop battling higher-level management on behalf of *Shimanchu* farmers. Originally a rice farmer rather than a sugar cane farmer, he became a *Nanseitogyou* manager because he had studied agriculture; the farmers demanded that my grandfather apply for and somehow be hired into the position. With my grandfather's expertise in biotechnology and management harnessed, his initiatives patented and effectively stolen by the *Nanseitogyou* (that paid him off with short-lived honours),[6] the legislated singular focus on sugar production led to changes in land use, land tillage, landscape straightening and flattening, sugar cane crop variety, and of particular importance here, field irrigation resulting from the loss of wet rice fields[7]. Changes to field irrigation practices eliminated pond loach that thrived in the wet rice fields. It also impacted the availability of wara rice straw that was used in Tokuwase for tug-of-war during local festivals (Tokunoshima Town 2022: p.8).

Li (2010) explained that rural and Indigenous peoples located in East and Southeast Asia, beyond conventional colonial frontiers, know all too well what the processes of dispossession are and who is profiting from that colonial dispossession. Based on the facts provided by knowledge holders in Tokuwase,[8] the road to dispossession of rice cropping and replacing it with sugar was well-known, and the national rationale for replacing it known to be a fiction. My grandfather is not viewed as a colonial conspirator because he was a defender of island autonomy and he did not profit from any of the changes.

The Road to Dispossession Step Three: Accumulation by Dispossession and the Commodification of Water

Empire building is a form of "creative destruction" (Mcmurray 2022: p.559) that leads to colonial conversion. When lands are dispossessed, local and Indigenous diets are also dispossessed, for example, by focusing attention on food crops or rations that are convenient (even profitable) for empire, while detracting from community-based food procurement. Even so, shifting from subsistence to profitable staple crops and eventually to industrial or stimulant crops is preferable to the practice of land seizure for militarization (Kim 2022: p.81).

In Tokuwase, close to the oceans, was a stream that was said to have the best and most delicious, drinking water on Tokunoshima. Elder Keiko Gima spoke about the spring that fed the rice fields with water, while Elder Nobu Matsuyama lamented that the spring is no

6 To this day, 30 years after his retirement, my grandfather is posthumously credited by Elders for creation and breeding of 90% of the sugar cane varieties produced on Tokunoshima.

7 These are also linked to increased surface temperatures and decreased humidity, and the loss of significant food sources such as pond loach which had inhabited the fields.

8 I name these Elders, but also acknowledge that this story is told by others: The female Elders Keiko Gima, Nobu Matsuyama, Hidoko Matsuda, Kaori Maeda, and Shizue Shigehisa, and the younger male Elders the late Isamu Shigehisa (aged 67) and Michio Hisaeda (aged 60).

longer there. In the effort to maximize yields and increase profits, the *Nanseitogyou* led the farmers to convert the area to farmland, and the spring was eventually closed off. Elder Nobu Matsuyama also remembers the route she walked to the spring, recalling a few times she had fallen. Looking back, she said, the route was treacherous with the footpath being elevated from the rice fields filled with water. Carrying the water was also a skill, walking with it without spilling. If your foot caught the bucket at the back, all the water dumped out. She said, "I did that a few times" and nodded remembering the incidents. Before the spring was closed off, fetching water was necessary, common, and skilled work. It was not uncompensated work because having water in the home is the reward of fetching it; but, far from being a wage labour job, it was reproductive work performed within a capitalist ethic.

It was in Showa 36-7 (1960-1) that Tokuwase was provided with running water; this left the *Kurinicha and Inusha* springs muddy even though the Tokunoshima-Cho document said they have now been restored (Tokunoshima Town 2022: p.83). Prior to this, spring water was stored in tanks since Touwase is atop a hill, meaning digging a well for ground water was not an option (p.83). Before the spring was closed off, Elder Nobu Matsuyama explained, the *Nanseitogyo* (sugarcane factory) came to Tokuwase and dumped their waste in the stream. The people who lived by the *hama* (the beach where the stream met the spring) said the water was no longer suitable to drink. Elder Isamu Shigehisa added that the water ran black with the introduction of the *Nanseitogyo*. When the people in the community complained to the higher management of *Nanseitogyo* about what had happened to their water, the company's response was that the community members needed to prove that the water was contaminated, using scientific tests showing that the contamination was directly from the factory. As usual, the burden of proof was on the **impacted**, while the law favours the **impactors**. Community members had little knowledge of—or access to—such toxicological "fast science," being more familiar with observational data over time. No one wanted to use "the self" as the site of experimenting to find out what the long-term effect of consuming the polluted water is, while Elders like Shioushi Mizumoto expressed concerns about faulty research data presented by corporate scientists.910 Eventually, Elder Nobu Matsuyama said that "they" took samples of the water for testing, and that the results, when reported, made running water lines desirable in the homes of Tokuwase. That is, when the community was able to prove that the factory's pollution damaged the water supply, and that the damage was caused by the *Nanseitougyo*, the solution was not to address the pollution, but rather for the company to compensate affected community members for plumbing and running water. The people who lived by the *hama* (those who reported the issue), had pipes

9 Tesh (2000) supports Elders' concerns, describing how in-laboratory scientific research is flawed because it is based on assumptions that do not represent chemical behaviours in situ. Pointing to the substitution of laboratory data for applied data, short time periods for long ones, burden of proof concerns, laboratory measures for human experience, and proximity to hazardous substances for actual exposure, Tesh (2000) suggests that scientists' findings are unlikely to support a causal relationship between chemicals and health issues.

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laid for running water by the *Nanseitogyo*; however, those who could not prove they were dependent on the spring were left to fend for themselves. Drinking water was not the only thing affected.

Water is communal, free, natural and should not be owned.[11] The option to shift to running water was available before the the Nanseitougyo polluted the spring, but to do so was a household expense. The people of Tokuwase had common sense; the residents, especially those near the *hama* (beach close to the spring), did not want running water because they already had direct access to the best water on the island, until it was polluted. Therefore, the commodification of water stems from the fact that there was no longer a way to access clean water other than to pay for the pipes and the means of transportation to bring in drinking water from another source.[12]

It is important to remember that the spring water had always been managed by the community. The Tokuwase spring was originally used to fill the rice fields, while access points were established for obtaining good drinking water. Because Tokuwase does not have a river, the spring was traditionally used for laundry and for washing dishes; therefore, rice bran was used to scrub clothes and a specific form of rock was used to scrub pots, keeping the water clean and clear. The spring water was used for bathing, for cooking, for watering gardens. After contamination of the spring by the *Nanseitogyou*, my father (who also lived there) clearly remembers two communal taps – one was for drinking, and the other dispensed contaminated local water from the factory holding pond and was used for everything else. Even though it was no longer used for drinking, contaminated spring water infused the soils and gardens and everything that grew on them.

The Road to Dispossession Step Four: From Producers to Consumers to Capitalists

Capitalism is nothing new to the Amami Archipelago or the community of Tokuwase, even though Michio Hisaeda, aged only 60, cannot remember his family using money in their daily lives when he was young. Both the concept of capitalism and the radiating effects needed for capitalism to maintain itself are familiar to Indigenous people, peasants, and other rural peoples, as Li (2010) reminds us. A more recent—or even emerging—memory in the transition to capitalism is finding Indigenous positions to exist in capitalism, not as exploited producers or exporters, but as participants who accept its invitation, initiation, and imprisonment by becoming accomplices in consumption. In this sense, I have spoken to the confinement of spring water into a state of pollution and the confinement of people who no longer had the choice whether to use running water or to fetch it. There is a further aspect of confinement to consider, an encroaching one.

In July 2021, Tokunoshima became a UNESCO World Heritage Site under category

11 It is still enshrined in Japanese national policies in that individuals cannot purchase waterfront land or establish a private beach.

12 It is not unlike asking people to work. People cannot be owned, bought, or sold, but the time of people is a commodity. Time is what creates a worker. Access to water and even water itself cannot be owned but all the access points can be controlled, making water a commodity.

10, the most restrictive of the Natural heritage sites, referring to "…the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation" (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization 2021: np). Consequently, foraging—even for Indigenous Amami elders—is restricted (where not actually banned), while simultaneously there is a push to attract tourists to visit the island for its natural sites. *Shimanchu* have individually and collectively planned to make the island an eco-tourism destination, training as guides, investing in infrastructure in the form of vacation houses (built by cutting down forests and destroying the most beautiful beaches), roads, public facilities, and transportation links, commodifying cultural forms as entertainment (such as bullfighting, beachcombing or *shamisen* playing), and producing souvenir goods made by local artisans. Despite its relationship to slavery, and to the expropriation of land, water, and bodies, sugar production is remembered and celebrated in a new festival called the *Kokutou Matsuri*, or Black Sugar Festival (Nakagawa, 2024). That is, islanders are not willfully pursuing producer-ism, partaking in production to make money while espousing the value of work, but rather they are being forced into converting to consumerism, finding value in the ability to purchase things with money (Graeber 2018). As Graeber (2018) details, producerism and production links to factory work in the public imagination yet is more often characterized by caring work. Catering to consumer-ism by servicing tourism links to caring work. Caring work is managed by a few capitalists and carried out by poorly-remunerated working class individuals (Graeber 2018: p.234).

At the same time, neo-rurals from the mainland of Japan have begun to establish fashionable coffee shops, inns, organic goods stores, and eco-tourism hubs. While some *shimanchu* regard eco-tourism as better than traditional tourism, and hope neo-rural in-migration is hoped to reverse the population decline of Tokunoshima, there is a cost; non-Indigenous neo-rural presence hastens the transition to entrepreneurship and working for wages, the dispossession of lands and waters through sale and increased taxes for everyone, and replaces yet more of the remaining subsistence agriculture with a perceived autonomy from capitalism that is more an "apolitical lifestyle choice" than "alternative mode of life" because it is still nested within "capitalist value-making mechanisms" (Snikersproge 2023: p.66).

The Road to Dispossession Step Five: Let Die

Li (2009) reminds us of those who have been forgotten, considered surplus, or even expendable, and who are "let die" because the dominant narrative of neoliberal capitalism is a fiction suggesting that "there will be sooner or later—a transition from agriculture to industry, country to city, and peasant to entrepreneurial farmer or wage worker" (p.69) that will absorb individuals and give them a means to make a living, making their displacement within the system temporary. This is, in fact, the dominant narrative in Tokuwase. Had the people of Tokuwase been unable to prove the waters were polluted, they would have had to find their own solution. Because the *Nanseitougyo*'s pollution of the water source

were accommodated—through a "solution" that did not require the company to officially admit culpability—the environment and people of Tokuwase were rendered unconsidered, expendable, surplus. In fact, forcing the Indigenous *Shimanchu* people to drink contaminated waters (and to also eat food grown in toxic soil, watered by polluted water) was tantamount to letting them die. Moreover, the high-level management at the *Nanseitougyo* knew what waste was being put into the waters but did not consider telling the residents. Neither the people nor the fish, animals, plants, wildlife were considered to be important living beings who would be impacted by the industrial waste draining into the stream.

"Letting die" in the case of Tokuwase references the creation of a toxic geographical space for *Shimanchu* to live in, an instance of "slow violence" that "...occurs gradually and *out of sight,* a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is *typically not viewed as violence at all"* (Nixon 2011: p.2). The removal of the rice fields, expansion of sugar cane harvesting, and introduction of chemical agents degraded the environment, and contaminated whatever the land produced. "Letting die was not an oversight. It was a calculated decision, rationalized in terms of the greater good" (Li 2009: p.80). The end result of "let die" remains to be seen. The harm of toxicity accrues over time; the land, the water, and the human and non-human bodies/entities become worn down after an initial period during which they still appear able to defend themselves. That is, the harm will intensify intergenerationally.

Anti-Utopic Sentiment and Imagining Solutions

Installing pipes and plumbing to address polluted drinking water—rather than tackling the sources of pollution, namely *the Nanseitougyo's* wastewater disposal practices—has established the *Nanseitougyo* as an unchanging institution. This, in turn, has arguably led to the eradication of utopian imagination in Tokuwase. The decision-makers who determined that piping water from another source would be a fair and adequate solution are not named—understandably so, as it is not safe in Tokunoshima to identify capitalist "villains." Yet this decision reveals a shifting narrative about the *Nanseitogyou* in Tokuwase, and indeed across the island. That is, rather than being viewed as an unreliable entity that takes autonomy away from the farmers and steals the commons from the community, the *Nanseitogyou* must be viewed as a valuable and reliable source of income for community members. In other words, the fact that the *Nanseitogyou*'s actions were not put to an end, and instead the solution created was for the community members to live parallel to the pollution, sets a precedent—that the community of Tokuwase is no longer allowed to imagine a world without the *Nanseitougyo* in it. Using Weeks' (2014) arguments regarding anti-utopic sentiments as a tool of capitalist regimentation, this could lead us to conclude that the collective imagination for change is now limited to only "solutions" that do not infringe on the activities of capital, in this case sugar.

Ultimately, when the solutions are bounded, limited to those that do not impact the actions or decisions of the *Nanseitogyou* higher management, utopic thinking is not merely constrained but effectively eliminated. That is, the neo-rurals described by Snikersproge

(2023) chased utopic dreams of a better life, however unrealistic and romanticized those dreams may have been. Graeber (2018) too engaged in utopic thinking by asking us to imagine a world without bullshit jobs, a place where jobs have meaning. Thinking utopically is perhaps even necessary; in fact, it is what we do as academics working toward social justice ideals and believing that our research can change the world. However, if we look to the past for inspiration, as perhaps neo-rurals did, we may forget that in the past our ancestors lived without running water, without medicine, without the ability to store food indefinitely to guard against famine—and we must ask if those are sacrifices we are willing to make. In this, although I have myself identified a narrative of agrarian transition as it worked in Tokuwase, I share with Li (2009) the following sentiment:

> Although I began this essay with a critique of the linear narrative of agrarian transition, I want to stress that I do not counterpose transition to a rural utopia, in which people reject new products and labour regimes in favour of locally oriented production on small family farms. As my own field research in Sulawesi demonstrates very clearly, and other studies confirm, the transition narrative corresponds closely to a popular desire to leave behind the insecurities of subsistence production, and enjoy the fuller life that better food, housing, education and health care can offer (Ferguson 2005, Rigg 2006). Yet the sad truth is that this desire is frustrated, especially for the poorest people, who are routinely dispossessed through the very processes that enable other people to prosper. (Li 2009: p.87)

On the other hand, when we imagine utopically about increased technologies that will enhance life in the future, we must be aware that all innovative technologies potentially degrade the environment, prioritize human beings over non-human beings, isolate us further from relying on one another, and prevent us from engaging in interspecies communication. It is important to view utopic thinking as a mode of imagining demands for the future, or critiques of the way things are presently.

Conclusion

In the past, Taoist monks came to the islands to steal secrets for achieving an eternal happy life; this is reflected in the present-day identification of the Amami Archipelago as being in the "blue zone," (Bluetter and Skemp 2016) identifying places of longevity and community. It raises the question: if both past and present peoples regarded the islands as a Utopia, why have commodification, contamination, and dispossession been allowed to destroy it? The reason, it seems, is that while colonialists, capitalists, and industries like the *Nanseitogyou* have been permitted to imagine changes that will make them richer, the people of Tokuwase have not even been permitted to envision the prevention of further dispossession. In fact, although UNESCO policies and legislation appear to protect the Amami Archipelago, the islands are currently experiencing ongoing military threat from China, and *Shimanchu* are therefore potentially subject to military-industrial expansion and further contamination and dispossession (Kim 2022, Matsumura 2015). In response, this paper represents my attempt to "think through" the dynamics of capitalist accumulation

and dispossession in order to give communities like Tokuwase something more than utopic visions of the past to "think with". Identifying processes that are unique to Tokuwase, but placing them in the larger picture of global events to reveal the motivations of capital and the consequences, is one way to engage in what I would call "slow activism" that can counter the "slow violence" that has occurred there. The question is whether Tokuwase community members are now able to take a step backward from "let die," and, if so, how many steps further back along the road to dispossession are they able and willing to take.

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