

Fellowship Report for Center for Pacific Islands Research Kagoshima University, Japan

“Mapping the communicative ecology of Amami Islands”

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My research fellowship took me on an unexpected journey of exploration of the Amami Islands over a period of six months, in the second half of 2017, during which not only I collected much valuable data for my research but also encountered many wonderful and inspiring island people from an amazing array of backgrounds. It was through these often informal, social and personal encounters with local people that I learned what it means to be an Amamian and to live on this group of islands in the southern Japanese archipelago. This would have been impossible without the support the Center for Pacific Islands Research offered me during my fieldwork on these islands.

This support came in many ways, including the much appreciated and well used office space and resources that also made available an apartment as my Naze base. But most importantly, it facilitated my collaboration with Professor Kuwahara as my research host. As an Amamian and Amami Islands scholar, he provided valuable networks, contacts and knowledge with which I was able to better understand my subject matter. The latter proved to be vital. Without the support of my local research colleague, I would not have been able to delve so deep into the islands society and culture in such a short time. For this only, the Centre’s role as a research facilitator was exceptional in its value.



Image 1: At Uken FM Station with the manager Hiroko..., volunteering program hosts and Prof Kuwahara

My research in the islands was an explorative ethnographic project that started mapping their communicative ecology. In this research, the communicative ecology approach refers to the various forms, resources, activities, channels and flows of communication and information used by an island or

group of islands. The research aimed at developing an in-depth understanding of the Amami Islands communicative environment as it forms part of existing island communities' structures; identifying key communicative practices that contribute to sustaining Amami islands sociocultural cohesion; exploring the role of media, in particular community radio, in localized information flows unique to the islands; and identifying future areas of research of value to Amami Islands and the field of Islands Studies especially through the application of the communicative ecology mapping approach. Their unique micro-communicative ecology makeup and distinctive geographical and cultural identity provide a rich case study for this approach.

Mapping as a methodology enables a broader comprehension of the complexity of specific island communities and allows for the exploration of the various types of communication activity island people are engaged in (locally, trans-locally, intra-island, inter-island, trans-peripheral, national etc.), the resources available and the understanding of how these can be used in sustaining island communities.

In this research, I was interested in exploring the following questions: *What is the communicative ecology of the Amami Islands \$ how can we define it?* The following sub-questions helped narrowing the scope of the research: 1) What are the characteristics, unique to the Amami Islands, that influence their communicative ecology? 2) How do different island communicative practices serve different purposes? 3) How do island communicative practices combine in the islanders' everyday lives? 4) What mechanisms are available to facilitate the expression of island/islanders 'voice' that enables participation in island communities? 5) What role does island identity play in Amami's communicative ecology and how is it reflected in its island media? 6) How can we theorize island communicative ecologies?



Image 2: With Kengo Fumoto at Amami FM station, Naze

During my fieldwork, I visited 4 out of the 6 main islands of the 8 that comprise this group: Kikaijima, Amami Oshima, Tokunoshima and Yoronjima. I spent most of my time in Amami Oshima where I established a network of local acquaintances that enabled me to see the island life through their eyes.

Whilst my time in the other 3 islands did not exceed at most a week, it was intensive and highly productive, the result of using established networks through the Center and my hosting Professor.

But it was not only the Amami Islands that I had the opportunity to explore. During my fellowship, I was also able to spend time in Iojima (Osumi Islands group), north of Amami Islands and in Okinawa. This provided a very useful comparative context for the Amami Islands. It was especially important to visit Okinawa, the southern neighbour and cultural/historical relative of Amami Islands. This visit generated new research and local collaborations.

Some of the early findings from this research were presented at the RETI conference in Okinawa in November 2017 while still conducting my fieldwork. They included the following **emerging themes**:

Communicative Ecology Layers:

Technological: the Naze based Amami Communication Systems Company is central in providing technological support that sustains the island's community media and other information networks and infrastructure.

Social: island media tap into existing social/cultural/economic/local administrative networks that allows a symbiosis among them and direct contribution to island life.

Discursive: communication networks and media are diverse and representative (dialect, music, health, comedy, gender, cross-generational, diasporic, etc.), participatory, democratic & community based with elements of inclusiveness of others outside the community and the island.

Island culture shaping new communicative ecology layers: The Islands' bilateral society that has resulted in a more egalitarian culture (Kuwahara, 2013) informs and shapes new communicative ecology layers (community media). By mapping the communicative ecology of the islands, we can see which elements of the island culture are actively engaging in shaping the communicative actions of the islanders.



Image 3: With Yuriko Hamada, Editor of the Horizon magazine, Naze

The common point/weather and typhoons: Community radio funding made available for disaster & emergency broadcasting. Amami FM becoming popular with younger audience through the 2010 heavy rain live broadcasting with listeners calling to find out if their relatives are safe.

The old and the new: "The Big but Benevolent Brother" beaming into your dining room; Kikijima's enduring Bosai Musen & community loudspeaker systems provides evidence how old systems and new technologies can enhance island information flows.

Meeting diverse audience needs: Established media cater to older & ageing population which is used to traditional media, e.g. Setouchi Cable TV which offers real time recording & CD content dissemination. Urban community radio caters to new audiences with an interest in contemporary island music while provincial community radio creates parallel “on-air” community spaces that include all community members.

Community FM overlapping existing & new island communicative ecology layers

Community radios, like the many island tunnels, have opened up the individual *shima communities* to the collective Amami Oshima community creating new perceptions and experiencing of island identity.

Uken FM: “*keeping the pigs away from the fields*”- the smallest capacity community FM in Japan (“a communication rather than an information tool” K. Fumoto 2017); established in 2010 as a replacement of the *bōsai musen* system it involves 40 community volunteers in its highly inclusive programming.

Island identity & urban community FM: Amami FM’s emergence as the radio of the islanders, by the islanders and for the islanders that seeks to enable Amami people to recognize the physical and cultural value of their islands; to treasure and further strengthen the “*yui*” island value (ties between people); and to pass down to the next generation the uniqueness of the island’s culture.

Island communicative rhizomes Amami FM & Asivi (live music) House

The FM and Asivi House cohabitation of time (*on air*) & space (*off air*) enables the creation of new island cultural practices that connect the islands with the rest of the world and help creating new, hybrid, experimental cultural expressions that demonstrate a confident island culture that can absorb outside influences by making them their own in distinctive ways.



Image 4: With the Hamada couple, producers and editors of Horizon manage and numerous publications on Amami Islands, Naze.

The role of the island catalyst for change & cultural enablers: key individuals have been identified as important agents of change and leading contributors to maintaining island communicative ecology (i.e. Kengo Fumoto: the founder of the first island radio; Kabayama Hiroichi: Amami Communication Systems owner; Uken Village Hall leader, community & Uken FM manager.)

Active community media = holistically healthy island communities = sustainable islands

Psychological, emotional and cultural health contribute to sustainable islands. The flourishing local media in Amami Oshima in the last 10 years has contributed to healthy island communities by adding new communicative layers enhancing and enriching the island’s communicative ecology.

In conclusion, I would like to note some highlights from this wonderful research journey to illustrate the richness of my island encounters. They include meeting the Hamada couple that offered access to their unique media and creative island work and the potential for future collaboration in translating it into English; sharing time in the special Café Club of the Yamato village with its elderly clients observing how such an activity can offer alternative ways of dealing with the ageing island population; visiting and revisiting Uken FM, my most delightful research discovery that proved all theories about community radio; experiencing true island hospitality offered by Toyokazu and Kumeko Oku in Kikaijima which serendipitously brought to my attention *bōsai musen* and resulting in more research into this unique island disaster and emergency information system; having a long coffee chat with a Tokunoshima man who shared his very frank insights into the dark side of this island's gambling culture; standing on Yoron castle hill looking over Okinawa to the south and experiencing physically the overlapping island boundaries; and experiencing first-hand though unique musical performances the links between Amami FM and the Asivi House and their unique contribution to an island music renaissance. The list of special moments is a long one as these islands are unique in many ways.



Image 5: Networking through socializing with the locals, Naze

I mentioned above deliberately that this fellowship provided a starting point. Like all ethnographic research, one needs to spend considerable time on location before claiming to have fully understood the local context which is so important for this kind of research. But it was a very productive start that yielded very rich data and during which I achieved more than I initially thought possible. It has also provided the incentive to return to the islands in the future and continue my collaboration with the Center.



Image 6: Exploring the natural beauty of Yoronjima with Kagoshima University students during their education trip