

## Preface

### Amami Oshima: Japan's secret paradise

Ian Richards (Osaka City University)

My Air New Zealand flight has drifted into Kansai Airport, and I'm in Osaka—sort of. The airport, known as *Kanku* to locals, is on a man-made island in Osaka Bay, and the terminal itself is a sight: an airy building of glass and grey metal. It's been earthquake tested. *Kanku* had just opened when Kobe was levelled in 1995, and it came through without a scratch. But I'm not stopping. I'll collect my bags and fly down to a small island, Amami Oshima, in the southern tail below Japan's main island-chain. Amami is near Okinawa, it's semi-tropical, and it's so off the beaten track that even Japanese people have trouble locating it. "Oh yes," they say, after some thought, and "No, I've never been there."

I'm on a jet again, but it still takes an hour and a half from *Kanku*. We come in over the brightest, bluest water I've ever seen, and we land on an offshore runway. This seems a little unnecessary: at 712 square kilometres and with a population of 59 thousand, Amami is not really that small. The dry heat hits me as soon as I step off the plane. It's 33 degrees in July. I soon find that even the locals can't stand the heat. Almost every conversation I have over the next few days begins with, "Isn't it hot!", followed by "It sure is!". A bus-driver sympathises about the sweat dripping off my chin. "So this temperature is unusual?" I ask. "Oh no." He grins. "It's nothing for summer."

As we drive into the main town, Amami City, about twenty minutes away, I think I've arrived in Jamaica by mistake. We pass fields of sugar-cane, traditionally Amami's most important crop, and white sands and blue water are never far away. There are roadside stalls, selling giant watermelons, that just operate by using honesty-boxes. There's a special look about Amami people, too. They've got big brown eyes and heavy eyebrows, and they're short but very stocky. Most of the men look like natural rugby-players. Later, I hear why there's no loan-sharking on the island. Some gangsters from the mainland turned up a few years ago and lent out their money at high interest-rates. When their heavies went round to intimidate people and collect, they forced their way into apartments and houses packed with solid brothers, cousins—and friends of brothers and cousins. After a few battles the gangsters went back to the big smoke,

empty-handed.

True or not, it's a good story and illustrates how unfazed these island-people are by anything. Things run more-or-less on time, but nobody minds if you're late. They were just taking a break anyway. Amami is on the summer typhoon-belt and, when supply ships can't get through, it's ice-cream and beer which tends to run short. Even outsiders are assimilated in about five minutes. I'm off the bus and wandering through *Chuodouri*, for a long time Amami City's main shopping-arcade, when a little boy tugs at my sleeve. "Hey", he says, "you've got a funny face." It's not a criticism, just a comment. Perhaps I've been in a serious accident. "That's because I'm a foreigner," I say. "Oh I see," he nods and goes on his way.

Amami is still something of a secret. The locals discuss developing tourism, so that the island can become the crowded, big-bucks, beach-disco that Okinawa is, and then the islanders go home and forget about it. They'd rather go fishing, or swimming, or visit friends—and so they've kept their paradise intact. That said, Amami is a secret Mecca for Japan's most dedicated fishermen and scuba-divers. But I'm the lazy sort, and soon after booking into my hotel I head off to the beach with just my towel and sun-block—an absolute necessity in the dazzling sunlight—and my hat, my dark-glasses, my sandals, my cellphone, a book and some money for a cold beer. Ah, the simple life! I change in the changing rooms and stride out onto the sand...and for the first time in my life I'm ashamed of my body. It seems to have turned into an oversized, over-white, hairy monstrosity among all these well-built, tanned, hairless locals. I'm not fitting in as well as I'd hoped. Then I realise that everyone here is still unfazed: foreigners are probably like that with their clothes off.

The next day I go to Ohama, one of the two most well appointed beaches. To get there I have to go by bus over a huge hill, which gives a wonderful view of the beach stretched out below. Kids are jumping about in the shallows. There's a lot of coral in the water, and a few brave tropical fish swim among the human company. On shore, there's a collection of seaside shops and even an aquarium. After I've spent a day relaxing, the sun-

set over the water is a gorgeous display of colour, and after dark the stars are spread out in the sky like a map. I'm told that a jazz band plays here sometimes, provided...er, the boys are in the mood to jam.

As I wander down Amami City's Sansan Street, a man nods and says, "Isn't it hot!" "It sure is!" I respond, "How do you beat this kind of heat?" "Boxer shorts," he says and walks on. But there are other ways, and the best one is to eat a *Shirokuma*. I order one at a coffee-shop in the shopping-arcade. *Shirokuma* means "polar bear", and I understand when it's brought to my table: a large bowl heaped with shaved ice, smothered in condensed milk, and garnished with tropical fruits. I attack my bear with gusto and, about halfway through, I'm so chilly that I'm looking forward to getting outside again, away from the air-conditioning.

On the plane to Amami, I lost my nerve and asked another passenger if I could get a Big Mac on the island. "Oh no," he said. "There's no McDonald's." But I needn't have worried. Amami's speciality is a chicken dish called *Keihan*. I order one at my hotel's restaurant and eat it pool-side. At first, *Keihan* is nothing to look at: some individual piles of shredded chicken; chopped mushrooms and egg; and diced spring-onion, lemon-peel, papaya-pickles, ginger and dried seaweed. But put them all on top of rice in a bowl, add hot chicken soup, and presto! It's delicious. *Keihan* is Japanese, but with a touch of Chinese influence—just like Amami Oshima, in fact. Relative isolation meant that Amami's Chinese influences continued long after they'd diffused on mainland Japan, and the result is a unique culture.

Amami Oshima is also home for one of the world's deadliest snakes: the *habu*. The *habu* isn't quite the world's most venomous snake—not that you will care if one bites you—but it's by far the most aggressive. Instead of fearing large creatures, a *habu* will hunt anything with a body temperature higher than its own: including humans. That's the reason why I've given up all thought of hiking through the beautiful green hills behind Amami City. The locals tell me that only someone with a death-urge would wander up there. *Habu* have kept the environment pristine, but dangerous. "You don't see any in town, do you?" "Oh no," they all reassure me—with a twinkle in their eye.

To get to grips with this man-eating snake business, I visit the *Habu* Centre, near Amami City's harbour. It has information, and there's a video several times each day. The basement contains grisly pictures of snakes and victims. In enclosures lie real, diamond-backed *habu*, which can grow up to two metres long. I troop upstairs with some other tourists and watch a video of a mongoose and a *habu* fighting to the death. Mongooses were introduced around 1979, and they can attack faster than a snake can coil and strike—provided they don't hesitate. The mongoose wins, though the contest leaves me feeling sorry for the *habu*.

But it's not all surf, sea and snakes. There's Oshima *tsumugi*, a type of kimono-cloth, for which Amami is famous. One of Japan's best modern painters, Isson Tanaka, lived in Amami City

and worked in the *tsumugi* industry. Oshima *tsumugi* is made of silk, with a pattern elaborately woven into it by hand. Each pattern is unique. The colours come from dyeing in Amami's iron-rich mud. *Tsumugi* kimonos usually have dark, restrained colours and are for casual or semi-formal wear—not like the bright Kyoto kimonos worn at weddings and parties. Geometric black-and-white patterns are favoured by traditionalists, but there are also many astonishingly subtle and lovely modern designs, with the whole spectrum of colour. A *tsumugi* kimono takes about six months to produce, completely by hand, and the cost averages about 150 thousand yen—rising in price into the stratosphere.

Really, though, it's in order to dance at Amami City's summer festival that I've come here. The festival opens with dragon-boat races across the docks, in seven-man, traditional fishing craft that have been brightly painted. It's a distance of about a kilometre. The heat is baking, the boats have all the forward-motion of a brick, and the paddlers work hard. That night, there are fireworks over the harbour, with stalls selling snacks and toys, and a band playing somewhere, during which the town becomes one big picnic-ground. Everyone gasps as the explosions colour the sky and rattle the windows. Next day, there's a parade through the streets.

I've arranged to join the staff of a local business in the parade. We dance in wraparound, cotton kimonos and split-toed shoes. My face is heavily whitened with sun-block; I look so strange that one of the female staff members adds a little lipstick, completing my shift to transvestism. Just ahead of us is a drumming-group, drumming away like mad. The staff dance more-or-less in unison, and the parade does a circuit of streets. Loudspeakers blast recorded music and an announcer gives a running commentary. There are frequent breaks for a few beers. At the end of the parade, when people are feeling relaxed, absolutely everybody in town seems to go crazy and dance about. I'm the only 6-foot, half-drunk, sun-burned, garishly made-up foreigner in boxer-shorts with two left feet jumping around on the main street, but nobody minds—oh no. We're probably all like that.

#### About the author

Dr. Ian Richards is an Associate Professor of Literature at Osaka City University. He was born in New Zealand and graduated with a B.A. from the University of Canterbury. He then completed an M.A. at Queen Mary College, University of London, and a Ph.D. at Massey University. He was for several years the Executive Officer of the New Zealand Centre for Japanese Studies. He has worked at Osaka City University since 2001 and is the author of several books, mostly notably '*To Bed at Noon: the Life and Art of Maurice Duggan*', which was nominated for the New Zealand Book of the Year Awards in 1997.