

# “Shodansho” - A place for laughter and chatting A community led response to aging and depopulated small islands in Japan

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## Abstract

This article is based on ethnographic research that seeks to map various aspects of the Amami Islands communicative ecologies. The rapidly declining and aging population of small island communities in Japan have had a dramatic impact on their communicative ecologies and overall wellbeing. The Naon village café of the Yamato Municipal Village in Amami Oshima, in the southwest of the Japanese archipelago, has been a community initiative that sought to find creative and sustainable ways of addressing the needs of their aging members while embracing all generations. Established by the community in 2011 after extensive “mutual aid community mapping”, it became very quickly a focal place for the community. With the nominal cost of one coin (¥100), the café was run mostly by the women volunteers and utilized local resources while generating an income to cover its cost by hiring its space and offering services. Based on the principle of “self-help, mutual aid and mutual assistance,” the emphasis has been on the village welfare and information gathering and dissemination, making it thus a key nodal point in the community’s communicative ecology.

**Key words:** Amami Oshima, aging Japan, mutual aid, elderly care, community-based comprehensive care system

## Introduction

*“It’s not often one is farewelled with drums and singing but this is how the oldies of the Cafe Club in Naon village bid us farewell after having spent the afternoon in their small cafe, chatting and nibbling their tasteful homemade treats. It has been part of the islands’ culture in Amami to farewell guests this way and I was glad to experience the liveness and loveliness of it. Among those farewelling us with so much warmth was Motome-san, an elderly woman in her 80s and a regular of the café who rarely misses visiting the cafe to sing and share stories of the old times. It was our second time visiting as part of our research fieldwork that charts island communicative ecologies. We heard about village life and how to run sustainably a cooperative cafe that provides more than just a cup of coffee to its customers; an important communicative space for small and aging island communities. This café’s thriving was all thanks to four women volunteers who run it twice a month on a Saturday, so old people have a place to go to.” (authors’ ethnographic narrative 2017)*



Image 1: Motome-san and Shigeno-san outside the café \*

Image 2: Naon café entrance

The rapidly declining and aging population of small island communities in Japan have had a dramatic impact on their communicative ecologies and overall wellbeing. Amami Oshima, in the southwest of Kagoshima prefecture, has seen its population demographics changing radically since the 1950s, initially through depopulation and currently through aging. Several community initiatives have been implemented to mitigate the impact of this phenomenon with various results. The Naon village café of the Yamato Municipal Village in Amami Oshima has been a community led initiative that sought to find creative and sustainable ways of addressing the needs of its aging members while embracing all generations.

The *Non-tida-no-kai* café (名音テイダの会 / Naon Sun Association), affectionately referred to as *Shodansho* (笑談所 / a place for laughter and chatting) or *Kissaten* (喫茶店 / café)<sup>1</sup> was established by the Naon Women Association in 2011 after an extensive “mutual aid community mapping” process. It quickly became a focal place for the community on Saturday afternoons (pre-pandemic). With the nominal cost of “one coin” (¥100), the café has been run mostly by the women volunteers and utilizes local resources while generating an income to cover its cost by hiring its space and offering services.

Based on the principle of “self-help (*jijo*/ 自助), mutual aid (*kyojo*/ 共助) and mutual

assistance" (*gojo/ 互助*)<sup>2</sup>, the emphasis has been on the village welfare, manifesting in trouble shooting, intergenerational exchange activities, production and processing of agricultural products, mowing, plowing vegetable fields owned by the association that run the cafe, haircut services, village watching, practicing the harvest festival tradition and information gathering and dissemination, making it thus a key nodal point in the aging community's communicative ecology. The café remained closed during and after the Covid-19 pandemic largely because the initiative's leader took up a new role at the Municipal Village Hall, but it reopened in early 2024.

This article is based on ongoing ethnographic research that has sought to map various aspects of the Amami Islands communicative ecology, with a focus on local communication flows. The conceptual framework draws on the Island Communicative Ecologies (ICE) and Remote Island Communicative Ecologies (RICE) models the authors developed through their mapping fieldwork (see PAPOUTSAKI and KUWAHARA 2018, 2021, 2024, also see KONISHI and PAPOUTSAKI 2020), the theory of social capital and social cohesion, the concept of island feminism (KARIDES 2016, 2021) and the Japanese concept of "ikigai." The combined ethnographic and mapping approach allowed for the emergence of certain aspects of the islands communicative ecology that led to further inquiry. One of the emerging case studies was the Naon café which initially was included in our mapping as part of identifying communication flows in smaller aging island communities. While we conducted informal individual and group interviews, it was the ethnographic observations while spending time with the elderly and the volunteers in the café that were most useful and revealing, while tasting the café food and drinks and experiencing first-hand the liveliness of their encounters and impact on their wellbeing. The researchers were introduced by the café's volunteering team at the first visit to café; all participants were fully informed, using informal language, on the aims and objectives of the research and permission was sought and provided to use names and photos from the café and its customers.

## Background

Japan is expected to shrink 32 percent from the high of 128 million in 2008 to approximately 87 million by 2060. Japan does not only have one the world's longest life expectancies, (currently 81 years for men and 87 years for women), but also one of the fastest aging rates, with age 75 and above accounting for 16 percent of its total population, a number projected to reach 25 percent by 2050 (BOROVOY et al 2024). "Lonely deaths" are now occurring at a rate of an epidemic with some 68,000 elderly people expected to die alone and unnoticed in 2024 as the population continues to age (MCCURRY 20024). The aging and depopulation of Japanese islands is a complex issue with significant socioeconomic and cultural implications. BUSH (2011) and MATANLE (2014) both highlight the role of low fertility rates and longer life expectancy in driving these trends. MATANLE (2017) further explores the potential changes caused by depopulation that heighten spatial inequalities, particularly in non-metropolitan regions, while BLEHA (2011) underscores the importance of regional and local level adaptation and mitigation strategies, particularly in rural areas.

A range of interventions have been implemented in aging island communities to address the challenges of depopulation and an aging population which include among others the introduction of public long-term care insurance systems, the promotion of an active aging society, and the development of a model plan for older persons (OGAWA 2004). Community-based approaches have also been employed, such as those seen in rural Hokkaido, which have focused on social and economic benefits, and in Tokyo, where local initiatives have been driven by the national government (MURAKAMI 2009, KODATE 2017).

Research on aging and depopulated island communities in Japan has highlighted the importance of social clubs in providing social support and promoting active aging (TAKASE 2019). These clubs, often closed groups with limited membership, can be modified to enhance social connections (TAKASE 2019). The physical environment of housing complexes, such as *Haraichi-danchi* and *Oyamadai-danchi*, can also influence the extent of social capital among aging residents (NORDIN 2018). In the context of planned retirement communities, the preference for long-established relationships can drive the need for new social connections (KINOSHITA 1992).

Women-led initiatives in elderly care in Japan have been explored in various studies. LORD (1996) and KOSKIAHO (1995) both highlighted the role of women in providing care, with Lord specifically focusing on the FUKUSHI Club's cooperative care model. TANAKA (2008) provides a historical perspective, tracing the evolution of intergenerational mutual caregiving in Japan and the changing roles of women in this context. ARONSSON (2022) discusses the burden on professional women in Japan to care for aging relatives and the potential of robotic care devices to alleviate this burden. These studies collectively underscore the significant role of women in elderly care in Japan and the need for innovative solutions to support them in this role.

A range of studies have explored the concept of mutual aid in Japan which can be divided into three types: *yui* (結い / reciprocity through exchanging labour); *moyai* (催合い / redistribution based on a common store of goods and resources); and *tetsudai* (手伝い / nonreciprocal support in social rites of passage) (ONDA 2013). MATSUSHIGE et al (2012) and CHANDRA et al (2020) both highlighted the importance of mutual assistance in integrated home care, while ONDA (2013) further discusses the transformation of traditional mutual help networks in modern Japanese society.

CHIBA (2009) has explored the connection between “the prevention of home boundness” in the elderly and “support for purpose in life” in long-term caregiving (介護サービス / *kaigo sebisu*), a pressing social issue. A key prevention mechanism involves a sense of purpose (生き甲斐 / *ikigai*) for the elderly, which is considered important in supporting a sense of a fulfilling life (CHIBA 2009:7) Chiba has argued that the daily living ability, physical ability to carry out daily life, physical condition affected by diet etc., frequency of going out, cognitive ability and presence or absence of depression are interconnected and key factors in elderly falling into homeboundness (高齢者の閉じこもり / *koureisha no tojikomori*). One way to prevent such a situation, Chiba suggests, is developing a preventive care system (介護予防 / *kaigo yobou*) that is based on self-care with purpose-of-life support (CHIBA 2009:19). To prevent homeboundness and to support *ikigai* in the elderly more

effectively, it is considered important to increase social participation, especially through the functions of small groups. Gathering and other social activities and such as “salons” and “cafés” for the elderly are seen as a steppingstone to the organization of small groups (CHIBA 2009:19).

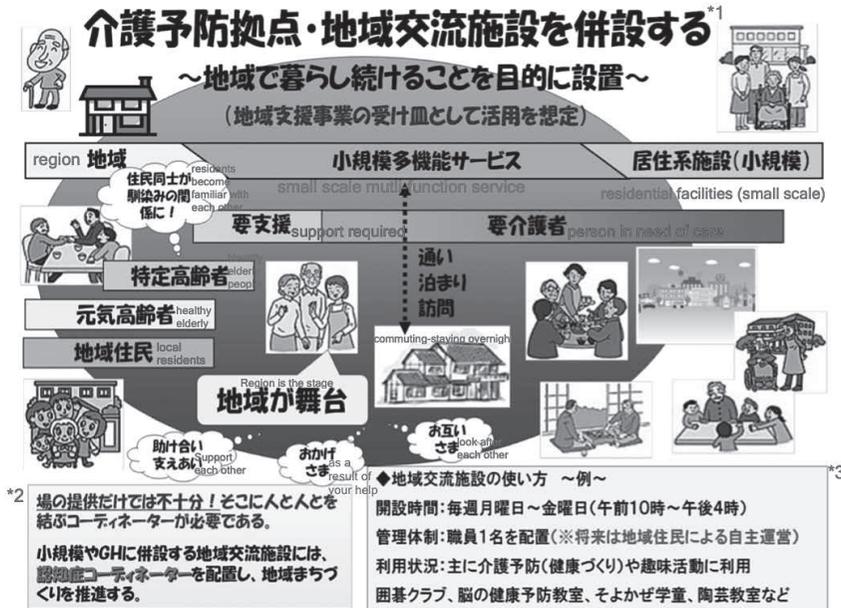


Figure 1: \*1/Community based care aiming to support living in community (assumed to be used as a receiver for local support projects); \*2 Simply providing a venue is not enough. A coordinator is needed to connect people together. Assign dementia coordinators to local exchange facilities and promote regional town development; \*3 How to use local community facilities- Examples. Opening hours: every Monday to Friday, 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM. Management system: One staff assigned (in the future, the facility would be managed independently by local residents). Usage status: mainly used for preventive care, (health promotion) and hobby activities (physical activity clubs, mental health prevention, pottery class, etc). (source: About the use of mutual aid, <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/topics/2013/02/dl/tp0215-11-04p.pdf>)

One of the preventative care initiatives implemented by the Japan National Council of Social Welfare is the “community salon” (地域サロン / *chiiki saron*). A venue for elderly people to socialize through engaging in local activities, community salons have been promoted nationwide since 1994. Based on the Social Welfare Act, the Social Welfare Council is a non-profit private organization operating at prefectural and municipal levels. Its key role, promoting community welfare, is carried out through various activities with cooperation of local residents, welfare committee members, social welfare personnel.<sup>3</sup>

Community salons are open to all senior citizens, although many salons are also open to any local resident regardless of age, encouraging thus inter-generational interaction (The Japan Foundation for Aging and Health). They are independently managed by residents, such as local welfare commissioners, neighborhood association officers, and volunteers. Municipality welfare-related organizations such as Social Welfare Council also provide

support. These venues, located in places where residents can easily walk to, are often housed in local community centers, meeting halls, and private homes. They are open for a few hours, about once a month and all events are held at a frequency that is sustainable for both participants and organizers. Some of the activities include exercising, crafts and arts, recreation and games, gardening and flower arrangement, interaction with children, cooking, lectures on health and nutrition, blood pressure measurement and health checks, singing/karaoke, outdoor activities and day trips to hot springs. The Japan Foundation for Aging and Health had documented the multiple benefits of community salons ranging from simply having fun and bringing variety to everyday life, making friends and preventing social isolation and house reclusiveness, reducing nursing care and dementia, finding purpose in life and increasing desire to participate in society.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges for rural communities in Japan and had a disrupting effect on community initiatives, especially for the elderly. Social isolation, exacerbated by changing social dynamics, has had a profound impact on community health (OHTA 2024). The halt in community socialization among the elderly has further underscored the importance of sustaining communication, particularly in the context of the pandemic (KAWAMURA 2020). Research by Jentsch and Polak-Rottman (2024) on the impact of COVID-19 on regional welfare-making processes indicates that as “the pandemic hindered social exchange and amplified longstanding processes of community decline, it further complicates the ongoing challenge of activating local communities to realize the vision of a healthy “aging in place” based on mutual support.”

### Aging and Depopulation in the Amami Islands

The Amami islands have been experiencing a significant aging and depopulation trend since the 1950s when rapid urbanization started taking place. This trend has been in line with the broader demographic shifts in Japan, which is currently facing a significant decrease in its population due to a sustained fall in reproduction rates (MATANLE 2014). The consequences of these demographic changes, including spatial inequalities, are being felt more acutely in non-metropolitan regions (MATANLE 2014, 2017). The Amami islands, an archipelago of small peripheral islands, is not an exception.

Table 1: Population Transition & Decreasing Rate in Amami Oshima

	1955	1965	1975	1985	1995	2005	2015	1955-2015
<b>Amami-shi</b>	56,866	58,001	58,257	60,455	53,410	49,617	43,156	75.9%
<b>Yamato-son</b>	5,528	4,125	2,733	2,419	2,092	2,013	1,530	27.7%
<b>Uken-son</b>	6,301	4,537	2,671	2,473	2,424	2,048	1,722	27.3%
<b>Setouchi-cho</b>	26,371	20,336	15,290	13,269	12,017	10,782	9,042	34.3%
<b>Tatsugo-cho</b>	8,841	7,349	6,220	6,183	5,889	6,002	5,806	65.7%
<b>Amami Oshima</b>	103,907	94,348	85,171	84,799	75,832	70,462	61,259	59.0%

(Source: National Census, Amami Oshima Sougou Senryaku Suishin Honbu March 2020)

<https://www.city.amami.lg.jp/kikaku/documents/jinkoubijyon.pdf>

Tables 1 and 3 draw a picture of Amami communities that have seen a dramatic decrease in their population with some communities having aging rates over 40 percent (table 2), and scoring higher (25.6%) than the national average (22.7%) (table 4). Within a period of 60 years, the overall population of Amami Oshima, the larger of the islands in this group, has halved.

Table 2: Population & Aging Rate in the Amami Islands (April 1<sup>st</sup> 2021)

<i>Municipality</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Population Over 65 years old</i>
Amami Oshima	59,673	20,355 (34.1%)
Amami City	41,970	13,728 (32.7%)
Tatsugo Town	5,944	1,985 (33.4%)
Yamato Village	1,412	604 (42.8%)
Uken Village	1,665	737 (44.3%)
Setouchi town	8,682	3,301 (38.0%)
Kikaijima	6,767	2,756 (40.7%)
Tokunoshima	22,497	7,926 (35.2%)
Okinoerabujima	11,996	4,487 (37.0%)
Yoronjima	5,090	1,837 (36.1%)
<b>Amami Islands Total Population</b>	<b>106,023</b>	<b>37,361 (35.2%)</b>

(Source: Amami Tokushukai Group: <http://tokushukai-amami-area.com/shoukai/population.html>)

Table 3: Population Transition of Amami City

<b>1980</b>	60,052
<b>1985</b>	60,455
<b>1990</b>	56,026
<b>2000</b>	51,570
<b>2005</b>	49,610
<b>2009</b>	46,891

(Source: Estimated population of Kagoshima Prefecture, Amami-shi Sougou Keikaku, p.7) <https://www.city.amami.lg.jp/kikaku/shise/shisaku/kekaku/documents/plan1-2.pdf>

Table 4: Comparative data on aging rates

<b>Year</b>	<b>Aging Rate in Amami City</b>	<b>Kagoshima Prefecture</b>	<b>Nationwide</b>
<b>1980</b>	10.6%	12.7%	9.1%
<b>1985</b>	12.4%	14.2%	10.3%
<b>1990</b>	15.4%	16.6%	12.0%
<b>2000</b>	21.0%	22.6%	17.3%
<b>2005</b>	23.5%	24.8%	20.1%
<b>2009</b>	25.9%	26.3%	22.7%
<b>2020</b>	32.5%*	32.5%**	28.6%**
<b>2021</b>	36.4%	33.1%	28.9%

(Source: Estimated population of Kagoshima Prefecture, Amami-shi Sougou Keikaku, p.5)

<https://www.city.amami.lg.jp/kikaku/shise/shisaku/kekaku/documents/plan1-2.pdf>

\* (Source: Japan Medical Analysis Platform) <https://jmap.jp/cities/detail/city/46222>

\*\* (Source: Kagoshima Prefecture) <https://www.pref.kagoshima.jp/ab13/kenko-fukushi/koreisya/koreika/kagoshimakennnokoureisyanogennzyounituite.html>

### **Yamato Municipal Village and Naon**

Yamato municipal village is located in the central part of Amami Oshima, facing the East China Sea and consists of eleven villages. Yamatohama, the second largest village (261 people with 150 households), forms the administrative center where the village hall, fire department, and facilities of the Ministry of the Environment are located (Yamato Sonshi Hensan Inkaei Hen 2010: 651). Naon village is the third largest with 183 people and 105 households (as of May 2024, Yamato Municipal Village Hall).

The population outflow in Yamato village showed a rapid decline from 1955 to 1975, when it almost halved, from 5,528 to 2,733 (Yamato Sonshi Hensan Inkaei Hen 2010: 659). According to the latest demographics, the number of households is 873 with a population of 1,474 out of which over 600 are above the age of 64 with an aging rate at 42.8 percent (see Table 2).

Since 1955, agriculture has slowed down, forestry has gradually declined, while the primary income generator skipjack fishing came to an end around 1970. Due to the reduction policy of rice cultivation by Japanese government, the rice cultivation was completely over by 1988 (Yamato Sonshi Hensan Inkaei Hen 2010:556-557). Under these circumstances, many of the villagers migrated to urban areas in search of income (pg 662-663). On the other hand, the municipal village boasts the largest production of plums in Japan (pg 547-548).



Image 3: Naon village

Naon is located at about twenty minutes by car from the center of Yamato municipal

village and is administratively called Naon but Non in dialect (Yamato Sonshi Hensan Iinkai Hen 2010: 489-490). Surrounded by steep mountains on three sides, it is open to the sea in front, and there is almost no flat land. People have lived by burning the mountains behind and planting yams, taros, sweet potatoes and radishes, and by picking up octopus and shellfish on the coral reefs. Until the opening of the bus service in 1971, people had to choose whether to cross the mountain or go from the sea to the next village. Thus, people's lives were almost self-sufficient while isolated from the outside world (Tabata 2005: 5-6).

The total number of Junior high school students of the whole Yamato village is 32 (11 in the third grade, 10 in the second, and 11 in the first) (Yamato Municipal Village Hall April 2024). By comparison, Naon has twenty-two children at nursery school and eleven at elementary school, which makes one of the villages with healthier student numbers (Hirono Shigeno, interview with authors February 2024). Traditionally children after finishing school migrate to urban areas. However, they often come back to raise their children. The work of younger people is often related to agriculture and elderly home care, especially many younger women working as nurses.

### **The emergence of the mutual aid mapping program in Amami Oshima**

The Naon village café discussed in this article was born out of the “community-based comprehensive care system” advocated by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, largely a mechanism put in place for the elderly to receive services so they can continue living independently in their own communities. This mechanism provided the starting point of ten resident-centered support groups in eleven villages in Yamato municipal village of Amami Oshima in 2011 and 2012, and with the support of the Local Elderly Care Management Center at the Health Welfare Division of Yamatoson, the municipality Naon village belongs to (*Rito Keizai Shimbun* 2020).

The Yamato municipal village population in 2021 was about 1400 and with an aging rate of over 42 percent (Amami Tokushukai Group). While it was clearly evident that there was a need for care services, not all elderly were open to receiving public support that did not allow them independence. Reflecting on the nature of administrative support which is often unilaterally imposed and taking away the power of self-help and mutual assistance the Yamato Municipal Village embarked on mapping a mutual aid system in their communities (*Rito Keizai Shimbun* 2020). The effort was guided by the “Supporting Map Making” (支え合いマップづくり) program proposed by KIHARA Takahisa<sup>4</sup> at the Research Institute for Resident-style Welfare.

Kihara was invited to visit Yamato village to share how mapping can help identify issues and develop initiatives suitable for each community. The map-making process took place twice in each of the ten participant communities. Using the disaster prevention map of each village, they started incorporated additional information that revealed a more complex picture, unique to each community (SHIGENO Hirono, interview with authors). The group of mostly female residents with the help of the facilitator mapped life in the community, residents' behavior and their relationships, with a focus on identifying community members

who lived alone and those involved in their care. What emerged was a pattern of elderly people's behavior, such as "that hard-working person has stopped working in the fields these days, isn't he?" or "it seems that hard work has become difficult since he/she got sick" (Rito Keizai Shimbun 2020). A realization that much can be done to improve their care needs from within the community and the municipal office commitment to avoid a top-down support approach right from the start resulted in a mapping exercise that gave birth to ten resident-centered supportive activities in these communities, most of which are still active today. Non-tida-no-kai café was opened as a result of this mapping process and was followed by several other resident-centred efforts suitable for each participant community.

At the core of this approach was the principle of self-help and mutual aid ("*if the people who live there do not act, they cannot create the place they want to live in*") and a belief that if you listen carefully, community members have their own answers to their needs. This includes the elderly who have accumulated skills and experience indispensable for a life in their island community.

*"By looking at different ways of living in each village, and respecting the individuality of the region and the values of the people, you can take advantage of the goodness you originally had and strengthen it. [...] I want to cherish the invisible part such as the relationship of trust between residents and the compassionate heart caring for each other." (Hayakawa, mapping facilitator; Rito Keizai Shimbun 2020).*

Among the projects set up were two independent village cafés programs, the Naon Village café that this article focuses on and the Ōganeku village café. All other programs have been run from the municipal building and consist mainly cooking food for delivery to elderly. The Ōganeku café was built for purpose on the main coastal road of the village by local carpenters who volunteered to build it with municipal funding (¥1.1 million). In February 2024 there were 90 people in the village, two thirds of which were elderly and only one child. The eldest person in the village was 96 and she was reported to coming to the café. Because the café was built on the main road which is away from the village center, it has not been easy for most elderly people to come. Most of the food thus prepared at the café has been delivered to them at home, but about eight elderly people coming regularly to eat. The café also hosts other activities, like origami workshops, *shimauta* (島唄 / island music) and karaoke. At New Year's Eve they come together to prepare rice cakes (*mochi*) to deliver to members. Due to decreasing numbers, they now open once a month (second Thursday, 11.30am to 2pm), down from twice a month from two years ago (Sunday – when men also came to drink- and Thursday). As for February 2024, they operate with four staff, all female volunteers. Lunch costs ¥700. They generate some income by getting paid ¥10.000 a month by the Yamato municipal village hall to clean the public toilets and public spaces. Village men contribute with fresh fish caught locally.

### **The Administrative Point System**

The Yamato Municipal Village has implemented two types of "administrative points" projects, the "Cheer up Points Project" for individuals and the "Mutual Support Points

Project” for voluntary groups, both of which are developed for the elderly over 65 years old. The aim of the “Cheer-up Points Project” has been to improve participation in health and social related activities and to maintain health and prevent nursing care of the elderly by increasing awareness among the villagers about improving their own health through frequent medical examination, etc.; by stimulating interest in preventive care activities to maintain good health.; by increasing the number of healthy villagers living out their senior years through participating in social activities, etc.; and expanding awareness of public participation in the promotion of community-based comprehensive care in Yamato Municipal Village (source: Yamato Municipal Village Hall).

The points system rewards participation in a number of activities, each of which is allocated one point. These include activities related to health promotion and nursing care prevention carried out by the village; attending various medical examinations, lectures, workshops, and events sponsored by the village; and joining in village and various group activities such as recreation, community salon, community beautification, traditional events, village meeting, etc. One point is equivalent to 100yen and when you have collected five points, you can get ¥500 ticket from the village hall that can be used at any shops in Yamato Municipal Village (source: Yamato Municipal Village Hall).

The aim of the “Mutual Support Point Project” is to encourage the elderly to participate in health promotion and social activities. Points are given to mutual aid activities carried out by voluntary groups that include elderly villagers over 65 years old. The group should be consisted of more than three people, half of which should be elderly. The duration of these activities should be one hour or more a day. Each group can get one point a day, collecting up to 12 points a year. One point is equivalent to ¥1000 ticket. The group can exchange their points for a “Regional Gift Ticket” at the village hall and can be used at any shop in the village (Source: Yamato Municipal Village Hall).

### **The establishment and functions of the *Non-tida-no-kai* café**

As often happens with successful community projects, the presence of a leader figure was pivotal in the establishment of the Naon café. As a civil welfare commissioner appointed by local administration, Hirono Shigeno, the person behind the *Non-tida-no-kai*, had been carrying out various wide-ranging activities for local communities over the years, including providing support for medical care, nursing care and child-rearing. Shigeru has also been a social worker, and her experience made her not only a natural leader but an effective one too. This meant she understood well the issues elderly people faced in her community and had the means and knowledge to search for solutions and funding. Her thinking has been that if they can keep the 65-75 age bracket active, that can have a positive impact when they get older. Her attitude, thus, has always been one of being pro-active to maintain healthy communities. As traditional mutual aid practices have been fading and the elderly population has been rapidly increasing, there has been a limit to what the administration can do. Just when she was wondering what could be done, she came to know about the “Supporting Map Making” program, proposed by the Research Institute for Resident-style Welfare.

According to Shigeno, the issues that became apparent from the mapping process in Naon village can be summarized as follows: the number of the elderly people who can longer work in the fields has been increasing and is home bound because there is no place to go during the day; many people used only public services because there was no place to easily gather in the village; an increasing number of elderly people were having minor problems on a daily basis; and an increasing number of those who would prefer to live well in their familiar areas were living with their children in the city or entering elderly homes against their will. As nuclear families have started becoming more common in the community, the burden of the elderly care fall on fewer family members who have other life pressures.

By becoming aware of these issues, community members driven by the ethos of “eventually, we will also go through it, so let’s start with what we can do when we can” made a start and once a ‘trouble shooting’ team was established, the *Non-tida-no-kai* concept was born and work started in setting it up. The fifteen founding members who joined the mapping activity were the community head, local welfare officer, youth group leader, and village caretaker (eight male and seven female), with most of them being over sixty years old.

The café was established in 2011 but the setting up work was completed in February 2012. It has since been operating out of a former warehouse offered by a villager. It was repaired and refurbished by the members themselves with the guidance of a former carpenter and with the additional support of ¥200,000 from the municipal office. They decorated it together and used material and kitchen items, like tableware, not used at home. Women have been mainly in charge of inside work, such as cooking and serving, while men have been mainly in charge of outside work, such as mowing and renovations. The opening hours were fixed to once a week, every Saturday, from 2 pm to 5 pm. The name of *Tida-no-kai* was decided after discussion by the members in consultation with the community.

Centrally located, near the community hall and a village shop, and thus easily accessible to community members, the *Non-tida-no-kai* café became very quickly a place where village people would get together every Saturday, engage in various activities and also check on each other’s safety, especially for the elderly who tend to stay home. Affectionately referred to as *Shodansho* (a place for laughter and chatting) or *Kissaten* (café), it also became a place for cultural preservation through cultural exchanges. Among the elderly people of the village, a sense of fellowship was born by coming to the coffee shop weekly to catch up.

Inspired by the movie *The Yellow Handkerchief of Happiness*, the Naon village association came up with the idea of setting up the yellow flag on a tall rod in front of the coffee shop as a sign of opening. The flag can be seen from anywhere in the village, acting an invitation to the café. This led to the yellow flag raising practice spreading in the village, where elderly or their families were encouraged to set up a flagpole in front of their houses and using it every morning and evening to let the village know that they are well.



Image 4: Naon Café yellow flag

### The key functions and many activities of *Non-tida-no-kai*

The café has provided the incentive for an impressive number of activities that have been supporting the village’s welfare, including not only the café space, but also offering troubleshooting and health checks such as blood pressure and bone density measurement by Amami Medical Co-op, facilitating intergenerational exchanges, engaging in production and processing of agricultural products, service providing like mowing that generates an income, ploughing vegetable fields owned by the association, haircutting, and sustaining the village’s communicative ecology and village watching by gathering and disseminating information, among others.

It’s important to note that *Shodansho* is a café run by volunteering village residents. The volunteer spirit has been guided by the mottos of “by the people who can do what they can do when they can” and the “spirit of self-help, mutual aid and mutual assistance”. Three pillars were set at the center of the café’s activity: promotion of village welfare; activities in the café that deepen mutual ties; and dealing with people’s problems.

In pre-pandemic times, the café was open every Saturday from 2 pm to 5 pm. The yellow flag was used as an open sign and the rich menu on offer, sourced from local produce, such as jelly, pickles, local miso, sweets, coffee and so on, was set on the tray and served to each person. The average number of regular customers gathering at the coffee shop was about seventeen, many of whom were over 80 years old. Their response to why they liked coming to the case included: “I get energized when I come here”, “I feel fidgeting on Saturday” and that “*yuntaku*” (ゆんたく / talking) is a feast for them.

Just by going to the café, they would indirectly confirm each other’s safety, while enjoying singing popular songs and island songs (島唄 / *shima uta*) by clapping hands and chat about the good old days would add to their sense of wellbeing. Local news and old tales form the core of the sharing for those sharing a table at the café. It very quickly became a place for fun and positive energy, like: “If you go to that place, you can meet someone, or someone will be waiting for you, or you can talk to someone”. While you would mostly find elderly women as the main customers, men are also welcome and when they do are greeted

with applause. The norm was that after 4pm, coffee would be replaced with shochu, the local distilled drink and that's when you would see men coming.

According to Shigeno, "they were relieved to have a place where they can go on their own to meet people with whom they had a familiar relationship". She has always been thanked for creating a place where everyone can get together and get energized. Although the place is established as a regular coffee shop, it also serves as a gathering place for village events, meetings for the people originating from the same village, alumni, youth and women's association, small meetings among others.

The café's main *raison d'être* has been the wellbeing of the community's elderly which has manifested in various ways. The café, for instance, set a trend with its yellow flag raising which spread across the village. Armed with the motto of "never miss a lonely death," a landmark for the safety and security of the village, elderly people living alone are encouraged to raise a flag in their garden when they get up in the morning and take it down in the evening. The flag serves as a message to anyone living close by that the elderly person in the house is well. There have been some cases where an emergency response was generated due to failing flag raising.

Other activities such as watching over and calling out to children when they go to school, participating in school events, and connecting the local community with the school are also important. For those who seemed to become more recluse, old friends are asked to encourage them to come to the café a couple of times with them. If this goes well, that could motivate them next time to dress up and visit the café by themselves. According to Motome Fukuyama, local elderly in her 80s, the number of old people living alone and vacant houses has increased at worrying rates.

I have tried to call out as much as possible to see if the elderly in the neighborhood are doing well. However, I'm old and getting physically handicapped, so I don't know how long I can keep doing that. That's why, I'm glad that a café was opened in the village. Elderly people in the village gather at the café once a week on Saturday afternoon and enjoy a small talk. Those who tended to stay away also came to the café. The café is also becoming a place for the elderly people to interact with children and young people.

The number of people with dementia has been increasing as the population ages in the community. Troubleshooting meetings have been held with the aim to create conditions in their village where people can live with peace of mind even if they have dementia or disability. Solutions have often been found collectively by getting together and discussing with those who are close or related to elderly community members, such as family members, neighbors, village caretakers, a ward mayor, relatives, or a case worker. This for instance can manifest in identifying supporters who offer to casually keep an eye during the day on their elderly neighbors. Family members of a community member with dementia have often brought them to *Tida-no-kai* and relied on the association to keep an eye on their welfare. Those concerned get together at the café to hold a consultation and in that instance the Village Office provides ¥1,000 as a space booking fee.

Information exchange and safety confirmation became an important aspect of the café's

function and contributed significantly to the village’s information flows. For a local welfare officer like, Shigeno, *Non-tida café* has been playing a role as a place for watching over the elderly persons living alone and collecting and exchanging information about safety confirmation of them. If the usual regulars didn’t come, she would check their safety from available information, such as “today he/she went to a hospital” or “their children are coming”. Thus, the coffee shop became a place to watch over. Some people asked for more frequent opening hours. However, since all the staff members were working, they could only do it once a week. As elderly people in the village also have various errands such as going to the community hall or hospitals, once a week seems to be just right.



Image 5 and 6: the café interior

Along with the community volunteering element, the sustainable way of running this community café has been an important aspect of its success. The support from the village office was only to cover the initial expenses for refurbishment materials and purchasing cost of a tractor. Since the *Non-tida* café has been operating independently, they have to buy coffee beans and other material on their own. The café thus has had to be inventive in generating an income from various sources. They set up an operation fee. A bamboo tube at the entrance reminded customers to put their coin of ¥100 but it was up to them whether they did or not. Although ¥100 is a negligible amount, in a month it would amount around ¥10,000, which would be enough to cover the maintenance cost such as electricity and water bills. In addition, they would sell radishes grown in their own fields and use the money as operating funds.

When the café is rented out as a meeting place for youth groups and the women’s association, they receive ¥1,000 fee. The tractor owned by the *Tida-no-kai* was also rented out for field work for ¥1,000 each time. The “administrative point system” set up by the village office has also been used since 2013 to generate income. Every time for instance people would get together in the café, it would earn them one point with the value of ¥1,000. If more than three people over 65 years old would come together to play golf, an activity seen as promoting good health, the points system would earn them ¥1,000. These points would then be exchanged with the “regional promotion tickets” and used in local shops. Twenty points would earn ¥20,000, which was used for instance to buy food seasonings for the coffee shop. In this fashion, they were able to save ¥40,000 through this point system over 5 years and bought an air conditioner.

Although maintaining the village's cultural traditions was not on the map of key functions, it very quickly became evident that social interactions could not be separated from cultural practices. From the very simple coming together to sing old island songs to pass the time to providing space for playing and teaching music instruments, the café added another layer to its functions. The members of the senior citizens' club have safeguarded the continuation of their village's cultural traditions across generations. An elderly male singer, for instance, taught *shima-uta* (Amami traditional singing) to younger people and school children in the café for six years, until he got sick. This has renewed an interest in traditional music and dance and members of the youth association, determined not lose their cultural practices, have kept practicing the Naon August Dance at the community hall. There are children and adult sections in *shima-uta* and *shamisen* (三味線 /Amami instrument playing) performances, which are performed at the village summer festival in August, an important aspect of the island's cultural life. Also, I-turners from the city are also encouraged to participate in these performances.

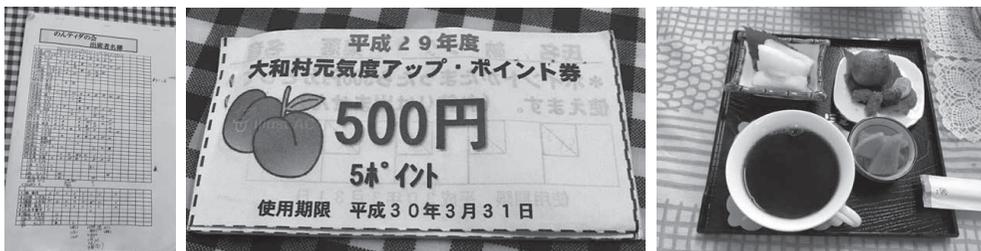


Image 7: an attendance check list kept at the café

Image 8: a ¥500 ticket bought through the administrative point system

Image 9: a coffee set on offer at the café

The café's activities are many and diverse. The café volunteers would grow radishes in the fields they own and sell them to generate income that funds the café activities. They would also help with mowing the park and school grounds, usually an activity for the male members. They participated in the annual elementary school athletic meeting as one of their annual events and sometimes, they organized bus trips on the island. They also engage in traditional crafts, like origami, beanbags making.

### Naon's Success Story Attracting Attention

By the time *Non-tida-no-kai* celebrated its 8th year in 2019, its success had started attracting a lot of media and Ministry of Health and Welfare reporting which generated a public interest. Medical doctors along with university students led by faculty members visited not only from Japan but also from South Korea and China. Visitors from neighboring villages and towns such as Uken village, Setouchi town and Tatsugo town also came to visit hoping that they could replicate the model. Since "mutual aid" in the community has been disappearing in many places, they were interested in seeing what contributed to the success of *Non-tida-no-kai*.

A delegation from Koshimizu-cho, a town in Hokkaido, including the deputy mayor, a public health nurse and a social welfare worker also visited in 2019. Koshimizu-cho is an agriculture and forestry town along the Sea of Okhotsk with the population of 4,833 (May 2019). Although the local conditions are different from Naon village, they hoped to gain some valuable insights. Shigeno was subsequently invited together with the Naon village mayor to Koshimizu-cho and she presented on *Non-tida-no-kai* and its various activities at a seminar attended by 170 people. Her key message to them was that community development needs the residents themselves to take action. “You can’t do anything without knowing your community. So, firstly, you need to explore what you can do in your community. Once you know it, it doesn’t matter how small it is, it’s important to start from that small one.”

### Post-covid Developments

While the Naon café remained closed during and after the pandemic, elderly people kept asking Shigeno when she would reopen it. Their wishes came true when the café reopened after being refurbished in February 2024. It now operates twice a month, the first and third Saturday, with 13 volunteers from Naon village, with the additional help of four volunteers from nearby villages. The café is run by a seven-members committee that includes four women who run the cafe and three men who are responsible for maintenance work. The renovation funds, about ¥1,1 million came from the local municipal hall, and allowed them to install a new kitchen and expand the table capacity.



Image 10 and 11: photos from the refurbished café that has created more sitting space and a new kitchen

Naon is experiencing healthier population numbers in comparison to other villages nearby with some couples having returned from the mainland to bring up their children in their community and that has added some hope to the village’s future. Naon has currently 19 children in a total population of 200, of which 134 people are over 40 years old. Since the philosophy of its leader, SHIGENO Hirono, is “Do what you can when you can,” an organic solution to the café’s continuity is considered best. While she is carrying again the mantle of the leader, she is actively developing its current members’ capacity, especially the younger ones, to take over as she is in her early 70s (at the time of our last meeting with her

in February 2024).

The café does not have the fields anymore which had provided a free supply of vegetables for cooking at the café but also an income source after selling them locally. However, most of the other activities remain the same, although they depend on the volunteer members interests and skills. The café still operates on the one-coin (¥100) contribution principle. Every time elderly come to the café, they get a stamp. Five stamps get the café a discount in most stores in the Yamato area. The café also offers three times a year a special lunch meal for children, which adds an intergenerational aspect of the café's function. When volunteers register with the Hall, they get about ¥5,000 a year which is used by the café to cover expenses. Other revenue comes from cleaning public spaces in the village which gets points from the Hall that translate into extra funds. That's a point system that the Hall is using to motivate communities to keep their spaces clean.

Shigeno's dream is to open 2-3 times a week to offer lunch to single elderly men who have no other options of cooked meals in the village. Because the café is in the center of the village, it is easier for elderly people to come, in comparison to the Oganeku café which was built on the main road and makes it harder for elderly people to go, so they do mostly food delivery to them.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Our last meeting with SHIGENO in February 2024, this time at another café operated by her young niece close to the municipal office, brought up memories of our last visit at the Naon café when some of the elderly came out with Shigeno to see us off. They had stayed in view, waving until we reached the end of the road and we had kept in our hearts their joyful faces. We felt sad when we heard the café was closed and delighted to learn from Shigeno that she was working to reopen it. Ethnography has its advantages as it allows you to take time with your observations. If we have written this article a year ago, we would have reached the sad conclusions that small initiatives are often too depended on the leadership of one individual, like Shigeno, who when they leave, the initiative loses its momentum. In this case, the pandemic came as a compounding cause of the café's closure.

In this research, we used the Island Communicative Ecology (ICE) framework adapted from TACCHI (2006) which contains various island-based activities, forms, systems, interconnections, networks, resources, flows and issues distinctive to islands (PAPOUTSAKI and KUWAHARA 2018, 2021, 2024, also see KONISHI and PAPOUTSAKI 2020). It also includes the context in which communication processes take place which involve locals engaging with others in their island social networks. ICE also contains the identity of participants, the topics of communication and the ways in which things are communicated. The Naon café has earned its place in the island's communicative ecology landscape by providing a unique and highly contextualized to the needs of the community space for localized activities that draw resources from the community's social capital. The micro-communicative ecology generated in the Naon café thrived because it addressed a real issue in a highly localized manner.

A concept borrowed by TACCHI et al. (2003), island communicative ecologies are also described as a “milieu of island agents” connected in various ways by various exchanges of forms of communication (PAPOUTSAKI and KUWAHARA 2018, 2021, 2024, also see KONISHI and PAPOUTSAKI 2020). Local agents of change play a key role in small island communicative ecologies by tapping into local flows of information, human resources and social capital that activate networks which in their turn help build and sustain local initiatives. It is important to reiterate here the guiding ethos of SHIGENO as a community leader and catalyst of change: “do what you can and when you can.” This enables a more sustainable way of operating local and small scale initiatives without putting pressure on limited resources. Capacity building in such depopulated and heavily aged island communities is challenging and taking a realistic approach is a sign of leadership. Re-establishing a network of volunteers brings capacity building issues at the forefront.

When studying Japanese social phenomena, social capital and social cohesion need to also be considered. Social cohesion is a multidimensional characteristic of collectives that includes social relations, connectedness and focus on the common good (for indicators for social cohesion see BERMAN and PHILIPS 2004). A key characteristic of Japanese society, and especially smaller island communities, is their high social cohesion levels which contributes to social capital. According to FUKUYAMA (2000), social capital is an informal norm that promotes cooperation between individuals. FUKUYAMA’s work on social capital identifies the important aspects of trust, values and networks, all of which played a role in the successful function of Naon café. The mutual aid program has been made possible in Japanese communities because shared values and high social cohesion encourage cooperation.

Taking into account the important role active members and alumni of the Women’s Association at that time as volunteers played in the success of the Naon Café and the wider role women play in elderly care in the Japanese society, Karides’ argument for a gendered perspective in island studies is considered pertinent to our study. KARIDES (2016, 2021) specifically advocates for an island feminist approach which offers a tool to explore how gender intersects with other social forces, and shapes the lives of islanders and the cultural and socio-economic conditions of islands. It is important to note that the Naon café has been an initiative that village women have played a central role in initiating and sustaining through local resources. By cleverly utilizing the limited human and natural resources of their community, these women have succeeded in bringing positive change to the elderly people lives in the village. By simply bringing together seniors at the café once a week, they created a system for collecting information about their health and the problems they face that feeds to an integrated wider system used for their welfare. The Naon café women’s activities emphasize the importance of human resources and the flow of people and communication in the village, and is contributing to a healthier communicative ecology. From the perspective of local resources, the activity on *Non-tida-no-kai* is creating new added value for the utilization of human resources.

An important Japanese concept used in this context is that of “*ikigai*” (生き甲斐 / purpose in life or meaning of life, self-actualization,) a significant factor in the well-being and

longevity of the elderly in Japan (SHIBASAKI and AOKI 2011). Hasewaga has also defined it as the “individual consciousness that motivates us to live” (HASEGAWA et.al. 2003: 390-396). As individuals age, their sense of *ikigai* can diminish, leading to a decline in well-being. The lack of *ikigai* is associated with poor general health and is an independent risk factor for intellectual dysfunction and mortality in older people (NAKANISHI 1999). In their research, RANDALL et al (2023) found that for older adults *ikigai* is more strongly related to satisfaction with discretionary social activities (leisure, hobbies, and friends) as opposed to social roles (work and family) and that older adults’ sources of *ikigai* included the eudaimonic aspects of vitality, positive relations with others, contribution, accomplishment, purpose, and personal growth. As our participants indicated, Naon café through its activities has enabled elderly people’s *ikigai*, a place preventing withdrawal from society, preventing long-term caregiving, and providing a place to maintain physical and mental good health. The café has also become a cultural device of self-help and mutual help for the village elderly to be able to live well in their community. As mentioned above, engaging in cultural activities adds to their sense of wellbeing as cultural expression is still a key aspect of these small island communities.

*“In our last meeting, Shigeno-san gifted us homemade Amami miso paste and mango condiments that reminded us the tasty food we had at the Naon café in the past and left feeling reassured the café’s reopening will continue caring for its elderly customer.” (authors narrative, February 2024)*

## Notes

\* Permission has been given for the use of names

1. For more on the Japanese Kissaten cafés see Motomura 2022.
2. For more on these principles see [www.mhlw.go.jp/topics/2013/02/dl/tp0215-11-04p.pdf](http://www.mhlw.go.jp/topics/2013/02/dl/tp0215-11-04p.pdf) and <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/file/06-Seisakujouhou-12600000-Seisakutoukatsukan/0000053807.pdf>
3. For more on the Japan National Council of Social Welfare and Community Salons see: [www.shakyo.or.jp/bunya/shakyo/index.html](http://www.shakyo.or.jp/bunya/shakyo/index.html) ; the Japan Foundation for Aging and Health: [www.tyojyu.or.jp/net/kenkou-tyoju/tyojyu-shakai/koreishatsudoinoba.html](http://www.tyojyu.or.jp/net/kenkou-tyoju/tyojyu-shakai/koreishatsudoinoba.html)
4. Takahisa Kihara has been researching “resident-style welfare” and he is accredited with the development of a “supporting map”. He has been focusing on “neighborhood welfare”, “good at being helped” and “relationship revolution” as a concrete measure to realize “resident-style welfare”. His main publications: *Mutual aid map making manual* (Tsutui Shobo, 201, in Japanese), *Helping each other by neighborhood power* (Tsutui Shobo 2006, in Japanese) , *Discovery of resident-style welfare* (Tsutui Shobo 2001, in Japanese (<https://www.sbrain.co.jp/keyperson/K-4074.htm> October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019)

## Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge Kagoshima University's International Center for Island Studies for hosting Dr Evangelia Papoutsaki as an International Research Fellow in 2017 and visiting researcher in 2019, 2023 and 2024. Above all, we would like to thank the Naon village café elderly customers and Hirono Shigeno, the Naon café inspiring leading figure, for sharing so generously their stories and for being such wonderful hosts at the Naon café.

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