



21st Century Bricoleurs: Remaking Rural Japan

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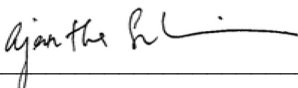
21st Century Bricoleurs: Remaking Rural Japan

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21st Century Bricoleurs: Remaking Rural Japan

A dissertation presented
by
P. Max Durayappah-Harrison
to
the Department of Anthropology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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21st Century Bricoleurs: Remaking Rural Japan

Abstract

Isumi lacks the trappings that are often associated with ‘a city’. No high-rises adorn its skyline, no central business district hums 24/7 with energy generated by foot traffic and commerce, and no cultural hub serves as a common ground for discourse among locals and visitors. What it possesses—be it a library, a public hall, a government office...—it often possesses in threes. For, just a few years ago, Isumi was not a city, but rather three towns, towns that were themselves made up of many yet smaller settlements consolidated over the preceding decades. Despite this diffuse and disparate disposition, the people of Isumi are united in an ongoing process, the reimagining of the area post-gappei (municipal merger) and its transformation into a quasi-bedroom community for those wishing to maintain one foot in the metropole of Tokyo, and another in the rural periphery of contemporary Japan. For locals and newcomers alike, this process, while implying integration and linkage, also connotes a collision of history, economy and culture that necessitates a (re)imagining of community (Anderson 1983).

Conducted over two years spent working alongside local, non-profit organizations whose stated mission was the fostering of ‘community’, the research upon which this study is based illustrates cases in which urban to rural migration has prompted bidirectional experiences of marginalization and integration. In an effort to reshape experience in a manner that serves both personal and communal goals, participation in local social movements tasked with ‘revitalizing community’ has grown and become a key factor in determining this rural city’s bricolage community identity and future.

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Explanatory Note

Throughout this dissertation the names of individuals are listed according to the Western fashion, with the personal preceding the family name. This practice is superseded only when the Japanese rendering of a well-known figure's name has become the norm to the extent that it is recorded thus within the majority of source material. An example of such a case would be Tokugawa Ieyasu, the first shogun of the era during which the name of the district from which my field site adopted its own was standardized. Romanization has been carried out according to the modified Hepburn system, except where macrons are not generally used, such as when writing commonly used Japanese words like Tokyo, Kyoto or Shinto. When Japanese words or place names that are not commonly known are present in the text, they are printed in italics and an explanation of their meaning and/or function is given following their first use. All translations from Japanese sources are my own.

During the course of writing, I employed the practice of replacing the actual names of my informants with pseudonyms as a means of granting them a degree of anonymity. Furthermore, in order to disguise their identity more thoroughly those individuals who figure most prominently have had elements of their personal information—such as precise age, work history and the area in which they live—altered. As the specific names given to the district, city, towns and villages that figure within this dissertation convey interpretable meaning and have implications owing to their origin and development, they have been retained where the manner of their discussion makes doing so necessary.

While living in the countryside of Japan, in many cases personal names were not used during the conversations that I was a party to. These are generally reserved for discourse between people with intimate familial or long-standing relationships. When conversing with individuals directly

or discussing them indirectly, the suffix *san* is in most contexts obligatory, though in instances where the speaker has an established and hierarchical relationship with the referent, alternatives such as *chan* and *kun* (diminutive suffixes applied to children or subordinates), *sama* (used to convey supplication), and *sensei* (a means of expressing respect and appended to the names of doctors and those in a pedagogical role) may be applied. Despite these practices being normative, I found that they were by no means absolute. Some of my informants consciously chose to eschew the norm, taking on nicknames and encouraging the use of diminutive suffixes that in other contexts would not typically be applied. In my experience, those doing so encouraged the habit as a marker of their own alterity. In order to adhere with this practice, I have adopted the convention of conforming with the name and suffix I used when conversing with my informants just prior to the point at which I left the field. Where the speech of others is recounted, however, I quote the suffix the speaker elected to deploy. I hope that in doing so I am successful in both conveying the contextual variability of formality, as well as the familiarity, status and attitudes of all parties involved.

Where necessary, I have adjusted standards of measurement to conform with the metric system. This is both because that is the predominant system used in Japan and a result of my own background causing my estimations of figures (where obtaining precise data and recording it in my notes was impractical) to be more reliable when using metric measurements.

Throughout the book I refer to the following conventional eras of Japanese history: the Heian period (794-1185); the Tokugawa period (1603-1868); the Meiji Period (1868-1912), the Taishō period (1912-1926); the Shōwa period (1926-1989); the Heisei period (1989-2019); and the Reiwa period (2019-).

Introduction

Encountering Isumin

The first time I met Isumin she was standing behind a small marquee, her face half buried in her hands while she haphazardly attempted to conceal herself from the crowd mingling nearby. I had not anticipated catching sight of her like this. Neither in this apparently awkward condition nor at the event we both happened to be attending. After all, it was only a small village festival held on an otherwise lazy Sunday afternoon in late summer, and I had assumed I would be far more likely to first meet her in the vicinity of the heavily populated and urbanized coast than the sparsely inhabited hills. Pleased to see her but also noticing her unsettled posture and downcast face, in that instant I felt a curious sense of fellowship, isolated as we both were at the periphery of an established community.

The reason for my presence at the festivities was that I had managed to procure an invitation to attend from Jōtarō-san, an acquaintance and aspiring farmer I had first met during a *ryōshi taiken* (“hunting experience”) organized by the municipal government to entice prospective migrants to the region. Several months after that day spent inspecting wild boar traps, setting deer snares and sewing decorative keychains out of leather, he had moved into a property near to the village that the festival was being held in, providing me with an avenue to an introduction to the kind close-knit community I was hoping to get to know. However, though his new residence had acquired for him the modest status of newcomer, I, on the other hand, was still a stranger and one who stood out like a sore thumb.

When I pointed Isumin’s presence out to Jōtarō-san his response was to chuckle dryly:

Oh, yes. There she is...I don’t know why [she’s here]. There aren’t many in these parts young enough to care much to see her.

Happily, when Isumin did eventually find her composure and cautiously emerge from her hiding place, supported on the arm of a man wearing a shirt emblazoned with the name of the city in which the village lay, a small contingent of children suddenly appeared and rushed over to greet her. It would later transpire that many of these were the children of outsiders who, like myself, were attending the event in order to observe the spectacle of a small-scale village fete rather than because they themselves were “local.” Isumin met the children’s greeting with her usual enthusiastic smile, doing her best not to stumble and fall as they sought to shake her hand and rub her chest. This was no easy task. She was, you see, bearing an incredible weight on her shoulders.

Dressed in white overalls, a waistcoat, and wearing large yellow shoes, Isumin is the bobble-headed *yuru-kyara* or “mascot” of the recently established Isumi City. At local events, it is her task, by way of a young affiliate of the municipal council donning her heavy and well-worn costume, to engage in a variety of mute celebratory exercises while surreptitiously reminding residents of their inclusion in a wider Isumi ‘corporate’ identity. A motley figure, the fringe of her blue hair is coiffed in the shape of a wave to denote the local coastline that lies to the east, while the *tsubaki* (“Camellia”) flower woven into its ‘strands’ represents the forested hills found to the west. Placed on the opposite side of her head is a hairclip in the shape of a species of spiny lobster famously sold in the south, above which sits a cap in the form of a *nashi* (“Japanese pear”) grown to the north. Lastly, in her outstretched hand she clasps a stalk of rice, the principal agricultural product of the area and “most important food” of the Japanese people (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). In addition to this panoply of symbolic markers designed to unite the inhabitants of the many disparate villages and towns that were made a ‘city,’ Isumin carries an even more burdensome load. For her task of transmitting a reimagined concept of space, one laden with the promise (or at least the hope) of a more prosperous, shared future, is a problematic one. Born fully formed out of

a major modernization project that has striven to reforge Japan’s rural regions in a manner that erases the stigma of obsolescence, she stands for an attempted remaking of the hinterland in a nation experiencing prolonged decline.

Were the role of a mascot only to convey the unique cultural identity of a group or place, Isumin has been given quite a task. Add the need to reinvigorate a sector of society, a way of living, associated with onerous old age, a waning population and economic precarity, and it becomes clear she stands on slippery ground.



Image 1. The forever genki¹ yuru-kyara, Isumin

¹ “Genki,” a common Japanese word lacking a direct translation, is interpretable as implying the possession of energy or health, being derived from the kanji 元気 “original spirit,” but also serves as a common greeting when stated in the form of a question.

Since the collapse of its asset price bubble in the early-1990s, Japan has endured a prolonged state of economic stagnation that has done much to undermine the optimism that marked the “boom” of previous decades.² Further to this decline, the dual issues of an aging population and a falling birthrate have cast their own dark pall over the nation’s prospects for recovery in the near future. These unfolding problems have combined to create a systemic crisis, one in which depleted economic resources have become concentrated in the hands of older generations while the future of the country, the shrinking youth demographic, faces the daunting prospect of supporting their increasingly numerous and costly seniors. For the young adults of Japan today, the positive and assumed normative condition of modernity in which growth and improvement is inexorable has thus been undone.

Japan’s economic and demographic dilemmas also possess a very particular spatial dimension. The industrialization and urban migration that accompanied the country’s post-War economic expansion resulted in a drastic rural transformation. Whereas in the year 1950 approximately half of the country’s population lived in rural areas, over the five decades that followed that figure fell to less than 10% (Matanle & Rausch 2011). An inverse to this outflow of people, however, was a prolonged inflow of capital. The postwar governments of Japan were longtime and enthusiastic investors in the rural economy, propping up industry and infrastructure even to the extent that inactivity was rewarded.³ Now that the ability to maintain this status quo has proved lacking, a need for municipalities outside of the major metropolitan areas to cut spending has become ever

² The initial phase of this period of malaise has been given the name “the lost decade,” a title that has achieved the feat of both sounding melodramatic while proving in retrospect to actually have been overly optimistic.

³ Beginning in the 1970s and lasting up until its gradual cessation from 2013 onwards, rice prices were managed through the enactment of the *gentan* (“production adjustment”) system in which farmers were subsidized for reducing crop supply, most often achieved by allowing fields to lie fallow (Mulgan 2000). Japan’s Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries announced that this reversal would phase in performance-based subsidies in order to foster a more entrepreneurial and self-reliant farm sector willing to risk direct engagement with an open market.

more extreme. Furthermore, owing to the lure of the city having long drawn the children of rural communities away from their places of birth, the countryside has transformed into a simulacrum of the woes that the country is experiencing more broadly. With land and other resources in the possession of actors who are steadily becoming less able to maintain their vitality and young adults facing obstacles in their ability to acquire control, inequality between growing and shrinking demographics is now mirrored in that between growing and shrinking regions.

With this dissertation, I aim to explore how the parties affected by the emergence of these inequalities, the young and the old and the urban and the rural, are managing contemporary disparities between themselves. Based on fieldwork conducted on the Pacific coast of Chiba prefecture, it explores the extent to which efforts to establish social co-dependence among residents of a recently amalgamated “city” in the countryside of Japan are succeeding where political and economic relationships previously established between urban and rural regions largely failed (Mizohata 2010). In so doing, I examine changes in the social and physical landscape of rural Japan, and show how novel methods of bridging difference and managing change are being formulated that, while perhaps not capable of sustaining the modernist project, may at least help achieve a degree of reconciliation with its faltering present and uncertain future.

Method

The research project that informs this dissertation was a result of both long-held ambition and happenstance. My motivation to study rural lifestyles came about through a childhood love for my father’s birthplace and its contrast with my own. While I had been raised in the center of a bustling British city known for its diversity, he had been born in a small terraced cottage in what was then an isolated village nestled in the hills of England’s Lake District. Visits to the region as a child imparted in me from an early age the potential costs and benefits of rural versus an urban life. Tack

onto this Town Mouse/Country Mouse dualism the emergence of an unforeseen interest in the culture and language of Japan and you have the seed that grew into my project; a project conducted not where up until 2016 I had spent the majority of my time in Japan, the metropolises of Tokyo and Yokohama, but principally among the farmers and other residents of its *inaka* (“countryside”).

The particulars of precisely how I came to live for two years in Isumi are likewise a mixture of both design and good fortune. When I set about the task of deciding how to study contemporary agricultural livelihoods using the anthropological method of participant observation, I realized I was not entirely sure what the ‘agriculture’ I wished to study was and where I might find it. What followed was a variety of short stays as a guest of part-time farmers, my room and board covered in exchange for variously cleaning out Kobe cattle cowsheds in Hokkaido, ploughing fields of *negi* (“Japanese spring onion”) in Gunma, and weeding secluded rice paddies in Niigata. Eventually, having concluded that each of these locales, while possessing unique qualities, would not be optimal in catering to my concern for identity formation in rural areas following the spate of 21st century municipal amalgamations,⁴ I threw my all into finding a home for myself and my family in recently established Isumi.⁵

Isumi possesses what may at first seem the oxymoronic condition of being both very close to Japan’s political, economic and cultural hub of Tokyo but also remarkably detached given this proximity. Located on the seaward side of the peninsula that forms one half of Tokyo Bay, there is no Shinkansen to shuttle you there and the use of regular trains means taking a long and circuitous route north and then south to enter the peninsula. Were one to opt instead to use a private

⁴ Here I am referring to the Heisei Daigappei (“Great Heisei Mergers”) that occurred during the mid-2000s and brought about the creation of Isumi city. This topic has been studied in particular depth by Anthony Rausch (2006 & 2008) individually and with Peter Matanle (2011).

⁵ I spent my primary fieldwork period in the company of my family. As such, reference to them is scattered throughout this text, something that reflects their indelible contribution to my research experience.

motor vehicle, a prohibitively expensive toll must be paid in order to cross the bridge and tunnel combination that fords the bay at its neck. The upside of this marriage of closeness to inconvenience is that the city hosts a large number of urban migrants who have become more invested in integrating than they perhaps first anticipated. After having determined to embrace this idiosyncrasy and judge the city's positionality a positive, over the course of the 24 months that followed my arrival I encountered a great many individuals and groups with a broad range of experiences and relationships with the region. In fact, managing all of my associations in a manner that left me time to produce sufficiently deep and rich research data became quite a daunting task. The size of the city, possessing at the time a population of around 39,000 distributed across an area of 60 square miles (Isumi City 2017),⁶ combined with the ability to travel easily granted by owning a car, meant that I was able to visit many people and places with very little difficulty. To avoid spreading my interactions too thinly I thus made a conscious effort to interact with several key networks, networks that while not always directly intersecting were all closely related to my developing research interests.

The most significant of the networks in which I became active had at its center a non-political organization (NPO) that brought about many of my fieldwork's most informative experiences and telling insights. Its function can most succinctly be described as city 'boosting,' a mission that led me to become acquainted with both locals and newcomers, as well as the members of the city government with whom it regularly collaborated. By granting me the status of an unpaid employee this NPO was incredibly useful in legitimating many of the inquiries that I made. Without this affiliation I would even go as far as to say that some of my research behavior would have likely been deemed prying and run into the roadblock of informant indifference or even disdain. As it

⁶ In the three years that have followed my initial arrival that number has fallen to approximately 37,000.

happened, the NPO's many activities afforded me the opportunity to perceive a wide variety of perspectives gleaned from a cross-section of Isumi's population and many organizations located both internally and externally. In fact, when reflecting on the circumstances by which I came to know each of my informants after returning from the field, I estimated that approximately 80% had an ongoing connection to this one NPO—though many were more closely connected to a different organization that pursued social causes aligned to their own interests. Yet while one might question whether a bias could have been planted in my research towards the outlook of this one institution, I would counter that when attempting to study Isumi in its totality it is inevitable that this organization, invested as it is in the city's realization as a corporate entity, figures strongly but not necessarily to the extent that other attitudes are overshadowed.

Outside of interaction with the above-mentioned NPO and the wider network of socially engaged groups with which it is affiliated, I was also active in the events and regular activities that took place in my own immediate neighborhood or that were put on to cater specifically to Isumi's families. I arrived in the field with my wife and a daughter of nursery school age and during the second of our two years in the area welcomed the arrival of a son born at the local, 9-bed maternity clinic. My family's presence resulted in exposure to a swath of special interest activities that I would have otherwise had little cause to be involved in. Including experiences such as attendance at *hoikuen* ("nursery school") sports days, swimming classes for toddlers and family-orientated festivals, my family brought about both lasting friendships and rich ethnographic data. To illustrate their significance, one need only look to the fact that a good number of my interviews with long-established farmers and even one local bureaucrat were arranged by way of the intercession of an

enthusiastic *mama-tomo* (“mother-friend”) of my wife.⁷ I can say without doubt that my time in Isumi would have lacked a great deal of its vibrancy had it not been for my status as a husband and father as well as a curious academic.

The last and most solitary of the major networks in Isumi that I regularly engaged with during my fieldwork was that of its roads. Driven by a desire to get a ‘lay of the land,’ shortly after my receipt of the gift of a used car from an incredibly generous president of a local dried seafood company, I took up the habit of conducting ‘driving surveys.’ At first intended to replicate on a larger scale the exhaustive data collection and collation practices that anthropologist Setha Low describes in her article on the study of urban space, *Spatializing Culture* (1996), the maze-like quality of land that lies within Isumi’s borders quickly turned my excursions into unplanned explorations of its highways and byways.⁸ On a day on which I had nothing else planned I might depart in the morning and endeavor to proceed down roads I had not yet driven or find an alternative route to a site about which I had only a modest familiarity. Costly in time and fuel, these trips nevertheless proved I could at least navigate the physical plane of a place I gradually came to realize I would never completely know. Like the pedestrians of Michel De Certeau’s *New York City* (1984) who created their own subjectivities through their ambulation, my ability to

⁷ If the term *kyōiku-mama* (“education mother”) is defined by the relationship between a mother, their child and the ‘work’ necessary to ensure the development of the child’s full academic potential (Allison 1996), the definition of *mama-tomo* can be understood as the sororal relationships motherhood brings about and the opportunities for ‘play’ it facilitates. Characterized by bonds formed between mothers engaged in childcare (particularly during the years of infancy when the pressure to establish a regime of disciplined learning is felt less acutely), the phenomenon of *mama-tomo* is, like *kyōiku-mama*, a product of the post-War environment. Changes in kinship patterns and the social acceptance of a separation of men/women and work/home, followed by a decline in the time required to maintain the domestic sphere thanks to technological advancement, has granted mothers the ability to engage in a range of peer group social activities that are (sometimes superficially) dedicated to the cultivation of the child. While ill-equipped to study the phenomenon directly, I developed a great interest in it thanks to my peripheral observation of the important role it plays in providing solidarity to those in a position of familial responsibility that might otherwise be isolated due to the norms of the contemporary Japanese nuclear family.

⁸ In her ethnographic illustration of the social mediating processes of spatial practices in two plazas in San José, Costa Rica, Low sought to capture “all the activities that occur” (864) by sectioning and non-sequentially observing discrete units of space, only speaking to people during the third phase of her participant observation.

traverse Isumi according to my own whims and, at least metaphorically, cut my own paths became a source of liberation. This liberation allowed me to reconcile myself to the uncomfortable realization that my work would only ever be but one of many intersecting writings about an area that has no singular author nor spectator, and exists on a scale that makes the village-study approach of rural ethnography I arrived with untenable. More lightheartedly, on occasion these drives were a wonderful opportunity for a chance meeting with a tertiary informant, some of whom grew to become valued interlocutors, or provided me with an introduction to an out-of-the-way restaurant I could visit under the pretext of carrying out ethnographic research.

Chapters

The two opening chapters of this dissertation contain vestiges of my desire to comprehend Isumi City in its entirety, as well as my eventual ‘submission to scale’ and the impossibility of creating a holistic study that truly encapsulates it. Chapter 1 introduces the city by situating it in a postmodern Japan before then attempting to weave the region into a lean account of the long and complex history of the Japanese state. In essence, my efforts to describe Isumi through the gaze of Certeau’s totalizing eye are laid bare. The chapter opens with the perspective of ‘the’ city planner: “the voyeur-god...who, like Schreber’s God, knows only cadavers, [and who] must disentangle [them] from the murky intertwining daily behaviors” that was so compelling to me before my feet landed on the undulating terrain of Isumi (Certeaur 1984: 92). I then explore in detail the significance of the name “Isumi” by tracing its origins and the role (or lack thereof) a name plays in a place’s identity and those of the people who live within it. Moving on to Chapter 2, a reflexive response to Chapter 1, I describe my arrival by two distinct routes. This is carried out as a means of both describing the region’s varied geography and elaborating on my personal impressions of Isumi before I became entwined in the “murky...daily behaviors” of its people. These recollections

lead me to question what processes foster a sense of belonging in individuals and communities given the often arbitrary and contextual nature of the borders that delineate territory and individual perception.

Chapter 3 provides some relief from the ‘arbitrariness of borders’ by elaborating on Isumi’s various social groups and community initiatives specifically through an examination of the buildings they use and the events that take place within them. Divided into multiple sections, the chapter focuses on several structures that were at least originally designed for the purpose of gestating and maintaining community. Examples include a *sonraku shūkaijō* (“community hall”) and an *akiya* (“vacant home”), each of which provide an opportunity for descriptive ethnography followed by a discussion of the role of shared physical spaces in bringing continuity to the lives of those who make use of them. Through recounting specific events I was a part of and elaborating on the background of the places in which these events occurred, I paint a picture of how many seemingly independent assemblages are involved in promoting (or sometimes undermining) Isumi’s corporate identity.

The following chapter, Chapter 4, moves out of the buildings of Isumi to better explore its ecology and the role of both locals and newcomers as custodians of the landscape. Many of my informants defined Isumi by means of the proactive steps they were taking to secure the survival of rural livelihoods and, by extension, the ecosystem in which they are found. The sites most at risk of rapid, life-affecting change were those found in the hill country. Critiquing the notion that land abandonment naturally results in the recovery of an innately positive biodiversity (Pereira & Navarro 2015), I discuss efforts to counteract human losses, experienced both as a loss of property and of identity, that result from the phenomenon of rewilding. The chapter also discusses perceptions of Japan’s countryside and questions how Isumi’s residents might contend with a

rarification that grants ‘earthiness’ a positive connotation but hinders the ability of the inaka to retain the population necessary to hold back the ‘wild’ that may overwhelm it.

Serving as a companion of sorts to Chapter 4, Chapter 5 both concludes the dissertation and turns the analysis towards Isumi’s lowland farming communities and the efforts being made to halt the declining role played by agriculture as an economic contributor to the region. Much of the land that makes up the plains of Isumi is agricultural, yet even along the more densely inhabited and well-maintained coast the industry is facing a seemingly inexorable decline born out of a fall in both the economic reward gleaned from the profession and the cultural capital it imparts on its practitioners. With a special focus paid to the approaches (and conflicts) of three parties, this chapter examines contemporary approaches to farming in Isumi. The first of these parties, the Matsudas, are a multi-generational farming family that is engaged in field consolidation, mechanization, and the supplementation of its workforce with seasonally employed immigrant labor; the second, the Permaculturalists, consists of a recently arrived collective of social innovators wishing to promote the spread of a permaculture approach to farming by way of a newly-constructed homestead/school;⁹ and the third, Ōtani Farm, is small organic farm run by a U-turn migrant and his wife who combine business innovation with ethical agriculture in their approach to farming.¹⁰ In addition to exploring the various successes and problems experienced by these groups, within the chapter the continuity of the divisions that separate them is problematized, as are the concepts of local and newcomer. What is more, I consider how those that

⁹ “Permaculture is a philosophy of working with, rather than against nature; of protracted and thoughtful observation rather than protracted and thoughtless labor; and of looking at plants and animals in all their functions, rather than treating any area as a single product system” (Mollison 1991: 1).

¹⁰ U-turners/U-turn migrants are those who have returned to their rural place of birth following a prolonged period spent living in one of Japan’s major metropolitan areas, usually to pursue a new profession and way of life.

ostensibly seem disempowered as actors living and working on the periphery of the Japanese state, whatever their role, may actually be better prepared to handle the faltering state of modernity.

CHAPTER ONE

Isumi from Above

A Death

On the 22nd of March, 2005, the renowned architect, Kenzō Tange, passed away. A key figure within the Metabolist movement, an approach to architecture that proposes the inclusion of elements inspired by organic growth in the construction of urban structures, Tange was responsible for numerous designs laden with political and cultural significance. Notable examples include the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park that commemorates the victims of the world's first nuclear attack; the Yoyogi National Stadium, built for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics considered to be a watershed moment in marking Japan's reemergence onto the world stage following World War II; and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, the seat from which the nation's capital has been administered since construction during the height of the bubble economy. Despite the comparative longevity of these seminal achievements versus many other structures built during the same era, the 1950s to 1990s being a period of rapid industrializing in a country where buildings often have something of an ephemeral existence,¹¹ his was a style that, in keeping with Metabolism's association of form and function with biological processes, advocated the replacement of the old with the new through a continuous remaking of space.

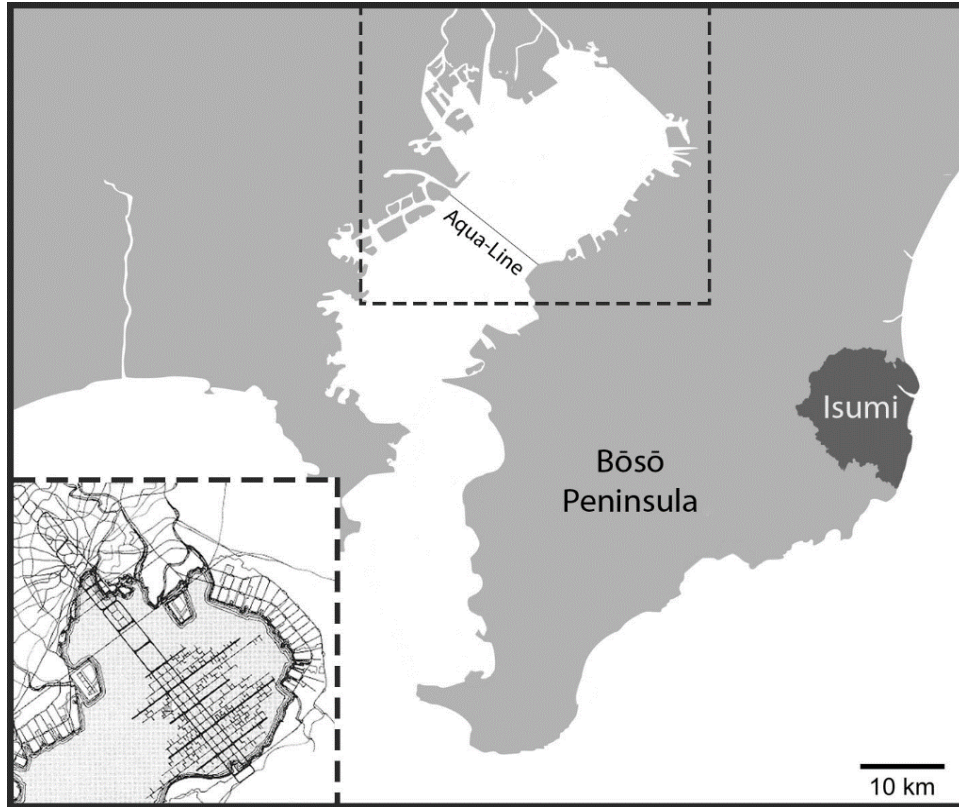
Perhaps the most famous of Tange's unrealized concepts, a not uncommon outcome for ideas emerging at the avant-garde of city planning, was his Tokyo Bay Project. Intending to solve issues of congestion in Tokyo's increasing urban sprawl, the architect envisioned a great expanse of

¹¹ A high frequency of natural disasters resulting from both the country's climate, geography and location on one of the world's most seismically active plate boundaries has historically necessitated a comparatively frequent reconstruction of property.

floating barge-like modules that would stretch 80km across the bay, extending the city's eastern edge towards the western coast of the Bōsō Peninsula by overcoming an obstruction present since its foundation. Casting one's eyes over the ambitious design it is evident that though the stated goal was rendering habitable what had long been a barrier to Tokyo's growth, the most densely populated section of the floating conurbation was intended to lie adjacent to the coastline of Chiba prefecture. A separate and far more sparsely occupied region would thus have its own contiguously inhabited space expanded, yet have that space fall under the political, economic and cultural sway of the neighboring megacity. Tokyo's seemingly insatiable hunger to consume an ever greater 'land' area would thereby ford a demarcation of jurisdiction etched into the very surface of the earth; a division that has influenced the lives of countless people for generations.

Despite being a compelling design that attracted significant acclaim (Cho 2018),¹² it is no surprise that the sheer scale of the project prevented Tange's proposal for a linear, aquatic expansion of Tokyo from moving forward. Though it does have something of a spiritual successor in the Tokyo Bay Aqua-Line, a bridge-tunnel combination that in 1997 linked Kanagawa prefecture with Tange's intended anchorage of Kisarazu, Chiba, the impact on the two differs in affect. An intended expansion became merely a linkage and thus the nature of the relationship between capital and province, city and country, the 'new' and the 'old' was left irresolute in a land where heterogeneity does not sit well. These are persistent dualities that Isumi, located at the eastern extreme of the Chiba peninsula, is inextricably bound up in.

¹² The global fame of the project was largely thanks to its inclusion in Reyner Banham's influential book entitled *Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past* (1976).



Map 1. Tokyo Bay, the Bōsō Peninsula and Isumi City (with Kenzō Tange's design inset)

Dividing Waters

It is a warm midmorning in June of 2016. Here in the lowlands close to the ocean, the cool waters of the Isumi river have slowed to a rate where their flow is almost imperceptible. My wife, who is clutching our infant daughter, and I have just left a house that lies a stone's throw from the river's concrete-reinforced banks. With us is Maiko-san, a friend who, along with her husband, has taken on the benevolent task of introducing us to the city, as well as a local estate agent who has been tirelessly showing us various properties. Thirty-years-old and surrounded by overgrown vegetation that has swamped all but a patch of earth just large enough to park a small car on, by contemporary Japanese standards the building is ripe for tearing down. For us, however, it is the last of four

homes for rent that we have visited that morning and despite its ramshackle condition the one that has charmed us the most.¹³

As I walk towards the riverside to peer down and muse the cul-de-sac's susceptibility to flooding, my wife calls a cheerful greeting to three children drawn by our visit to the porch of an adjacent house. Unsure how to react to her exuberance, the eldest, a girl of no more than ten years, meekly raises a hand in acknowledgement while holding her curious siblings to the threshold. Regrouping at the river's edge, Maiko-san, the estate agent and I note that it would be wonderful to have young children in the vicinity of our house so that my daughter might have playmates. Maiko-san is especially vocal in affirming the likelihood of a hospitable welcome, herself having experienced no difficulty reintegrating when she returned to Isumi two years prior after having spent several decades abroad.

They're shy now but they'll love your daughter. She'll soon be joining them in adventures and playing games. Other children live nearby too. This is one of only a few villages with a kindergarten, lower school and middle school so close by, you see. You'll be very welcome.

Fueled by an inclination towards dry humor and motivated by little more than our present location, I give a blithe response without first running it through my internal Anglo-Japanese cultural filter. Nodding in the direction beyond the white-painted barrier designed to prevent cars backing over the edge of the embankment and toppling into the river below, I reply:

“Yes, I'm sure everyone on this side is fine...but what about our enemies across the river?”

¹³ Though this would not be the house we eventually elected to spend my fieldwork living in.

The reaction to my admittedly weak joke comes swiftly. Though the estate agent merely frowns and turns to look vacantly away so that he might give the impression he has simply not heard or understood what I said, Maiko-san's face switches from its usual pleasant disposition to one of confusion mixed with an ample dose of dismay. "Max-san, that's not the case at all. Everyone gets on very well. We don't have enemies." These are sentences that she delivers slowly and with such an evident consternation that my wife, who has just joined us, turns towards me with a suspicious look in her eyes. Realizing the offense taken to me having so offhandedly implied serious discord among Isumi's inhabitants (inhabitants that I do not even yet know!), I attempt to explain what I meant, blurting out that it was only a bad joke. "British people love sarcasm...pretending to have conflict...anything really. I'm not being serious. You know, like how the English and the French are always teasing each other." My wife, having comprehended that my questionable sense of humor has again got me in trouble, attempts to back up my assertions (in a manner of sorts). "Oh yes. His jokes are really weird. I just ignore what he's saying most of the time." Relieved to have an intermediary present who is equally critical of my apparent propensity to rashly state my skewed point of view, Maiko-san relaxes and silently runs over what I had said before she again speaks.

"Oh, I see. You need to be careful, Max-san. With your sense of humor and your Japanese you could get into serious trouble."

Chastened, I thus conclude my first practical lesson in the process of learning that the waters of community and their divisions must be carefully navigated.

Integration versus Delineation

Behind the concept of community lies the assumption that a territory's inhabitants integrate in order to form a singular notion of identity. This occurs at the smallest of scales, such as the household, and extends up the humanistic taxonomy towards the nation state and beyond.

Politically speaking, rather than representing a tendency towards a malevolent nationalism, even well-functioning democracies that possess established forums for debate and that make allowances for the expression of non-violent conflict rely on a notion of citizen fellowship. Doing so is critical as a means of managing relationships both within their borders and defining those with countries that lie outside of them. In this regard Japan has achieved some notoriety for its development of a state ideology that takes this notion and enthusiastically runs with it. Even in spite of the ‘onslaught’ of a globalization process that has rendered all but the most isolationist of nations ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse, homogeneity has been assumed to persist up to the present day (Sugimoto 1999). In fact, a whole genre of pseudo-academic writing collectively known as *nihonjinron* (“Theories on the Japanese”) survived the attempted decimation of early-20th century ultranationalism and has continued to be successful in perpetuating the idea of a Japanese racial purity and concomitant correct way of being (Befu 1992). The growth in its popularity at the same time that other vestiges of imperial ideology were being abandoned provides evidence of the willingness of the body politic to submit to the illusion of a national type, even to the extent that such a submission undermines the freedoms of minorities to express divergent cultural practices and experiences.

By way of an example, since the establishment of the Empire of Japan following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the Ainu of Hokkaido have experienced persistent pressure to hide their culture and ethnicity by assimilating supposed Japanese norms of dress, language and behavior, thus becoming ‘properly’ Japanese. This expectation has persisted in the eyes of the state for decades, evidenced in discourse such as Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro’s declaration in the mid-1980s that Japan is a *tanitsu minzoku kokka*, an “ethnically homogenous nation state” (Burgess 2010). While accusations of Ainu assimilation and exploitation have been addressed to

some extent, such as in the signing in 1997 of the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act (hereafter the ACPA) that legislatively endorsed a more liberal approach to multiculturalism (Siddle 2002), policy changes have ultimately done little to protect rights and promote equality in difference. A largely unadmonished pressure to conform and appear united remains that continues to curtail freedoms to express diversity or acknowledge confrontation.

As I had so clearly found on the banks of the Isumi river in 2016, open expression of discontinuity or discord with one's fellows is best avoided in daily life, especially when in the presence of an outsider. Though a street, a river, a mountain and even, on occasion, an ocean might separate a body of people, the inclination towards finding (or imagining) some abstract quality that unites them allows for the projection of a united front. In this, Japan's history of ethnic nationalism persists and puts great focus on establishing (and defending) in-groups and out-groups.¹⁴ That everyday interactions are colored by a concern for fitting in and avoiding conflict is attested to by Maiko-san's quickness to deny the presence of any form of antagonism between Isumi residents long separated by the course of the river that shares the city's name, as well as the amount of time it took for those established residents of Isumi with whom I spoke to open up about antagonisms for which documentary evidence existed.¹⁵ Even in situations where freedom to express individuality is encouraged I found it to be the case that most opt to err on the side of conformity and conflict avoidance if they are aware they are being observed.

Despite this status quo, if one wishes to observe open contradiction of the peaceful status quo of modern Japan, one need only attend the local festivals that involve the interaction of districts that long ago lost any obvious sign of separation. These festivals, in providing period of liminality,

¹⁴ There is vast amount of material that explores this topic through an examination of the concepts *uchi* and *soto*, used to distinguish between in-groups and out-groups

¹⁵ These antagonisms are discussed more thoroughly in later chapters.

create momentary punctuations in the mundanity of social life in which tensions between internal and external definitions of community are able to bubble to the surface (Bestor 1989:225). They illuminate how the creation of an identity of place entails balancing mutually held ambitions and the desire for positive reciprocity with the very real divisions and competitions that lie in their way. Isumi's most notable example, the Hadaka ("naked") Matsuri, takes place every year in September on and around a beach in the southern portion of the city.¹⁶ And while it is conspicuously marketed by the city's tourism office as an Isumi tradition, it has (at least to insiders) remained solely associated with the factionalized neighborhoods whose exclusive inclusion has long been ordained by their falling within the parishes of 18 shrines. During the most frenetic portion of festivities in which *mikoshi* ("palanquins for a tutelary deity") are carried into the ocean surf by male participants, the jostling for prestige is evident throughout. Putting on prominent display the presence of distinct community identities that supersede civic allegiance, the actions of participants and the unwillingness of organizers to advertise the event as 'the city's' demonstrates the capacity for an undercurrent of delineated identities to persist but be concealed during regular daily life.

¹⁶ The name of the festival should not be taken literally. Participants wear white *momohiki* ("close-fitting trousers") and black *haramaki* ("chest wraps"), *kyahan* ("leggings"), *udenuki* and *hachimaki* ("headbands"), with the addition of a loose jacket called a *daboshatsu* to mark those leading proceedings.



Image 2. A poster depicting the shiofumi (tidal ablution) portion of Ōhara's Hadaka (Naked) Festival (Isumi's diminutive presence consists of the inclusion of the city mascot and the address)

From my vantage point on the northern bank of the Isumi river on that June midmorning, then, a stretch of water separated me from a community of people who I would later confirm do actually see themselves as separate in many ways. They and my soon-to-be neighbors had mutually become citizens of Isumi, yes, but the aggregate identity that followed was one brought about due to administrative processes that prompted a tenuous adoption or submission to a civic identity. Just as Kenzō Tange's proposed expansion of Tokyo across the bay that separates it from the Chiba peninsula was met by chagrin when raised with my informants, who considered such a notion an

imposition that would have resulted in the assimilation of one region by another, so too did extending friendship across the Isumi river, and many other boundaries, possess a greater complexity than was commonly acknowledged. In the end, in spite of the failure to realize Tange's grand plan, the people of Isumi have not been spared the Metabolist ambition to remake space and, as a side effect, problematize notions of identity.

A Birth

On the same day that Kenzō Tange succumbed to old age at his home in the city of Tokyo, in countryside approximately 100km away three suited men sat at a long table that had been draped in a crisp white sheet and placed on the stage of a spacious auditorium. Within Japanese culture white is a color strongly associated with ritual; the *shide* (white paper streamers folded in a particular manner) strung at shrines located throughout the country and the wedding kimono worn by brides participating in the traditional Shinto ceremony both being examples of cases where it is used as a means of symbolizing purity. The color choice was in this case highly appropriate. It had been chosen with sanctity in mind. The event the three were taking part in was a birth, after all.

The building that houses the auditorium stands nestled on the peak of a small hill. To the north lie several reservoirs; to the south some of the many rice fields that they feed when the warm weather of spring arrives. Homes to the east mark the edge of the largest community hub in the area, while to the west one finds the beginnings of the cedar woodland that blankets many of the more precipitous hillsides of the region. The precinct for which the building serves as an assembly hall counts its population at approximately 8,000 and is located slightly inland of the Pacific coast of the Bōsō Peninsula (Toshi 2006). A region devoted to fishing and agriculture, communities here are widely dispersed except at the seaward edge where they often hug the shore. Yet despite this thin and uneven distribution of people and industry, the men gathered each hold in their hand a

pen that will make them architects of a new city that will spring forth from beneath their feet, only without the need to clear a single square meter of land or lay even one new foundation. They, you see, are the mayors of the towns of Ōhara, Isumi and Misaki, and consolidation is their plan.

In the years preceding this meeting at which they will sign the bill responsible for combining their communities, the three men had come to the conclusion that it would be in the best interests of the residents they represented if they were to pool both their resources and their burdens, and reimagine their respective towns as a coherent whole in the guise of a city. Debts owed to central government were mounting and the chronic issue of declining rural populations meant tax revenues had little prospect of staving off growing liabilities endured by their respective towns. Once this pragmatic course had been plotted, it was only logical that the ceremony at which they would commit to remake Ōhara, Isumi and Misaki should take place in a building located in the town of Isumi. After all, Isumi City was the name that won out when the three debated what they would call their new home. In doing so, a name associated with the region for hundreds of years would be appropriated, subtly altered, and redeployed as a vessel for a new identity.

The significance of that decision should not be underestimated. Recent cases in the country had demonstrated that the naming of a new city comes with the potential to develop into a highly contentious topic during the process of municipal mergers and dissolutions (Shirotsuki et al. 2010). As with the naming of a child, the bonds that tie the new entity to a plurality of predecessors must often be weighed against one another and consensus reached over the desired identity to be projected. Had Isumi been the largest and most economically well-off of the three, it might have stood to reason that it should simply absorb its smaller and poorer neighbors. The fact is, however, that it was neither. Yet in response to a need for a radical remedy to a rural decline that afflicts much of Japan, the name “Isumi” won out as the chosen designation for this new-born city.

Why was it that Isumi was selected as the preeminent name around which a new civic identity would be formed? How could it be that the inland town with arguably the least vitality was deemed the one that would persist in name in the face of economic insecurity? What veneer of historicity did the name “Isumi” convey that its neighbors apparently lacked, and why might a subtle alteration need to be made in order to make it an appropriate choice during the process of establishing on the Bōsō Peninsula a modern, gestalt identity?

Of Etymology and Identity

I met Nakatani-san in the small, tightly-packed, bookcase-lined room that constitutes Misaki Community Center’s library. Tucked away at the back of a building that houses within it a large lecture theater, various classrooms, an indoor basketball court and changing facilities for the baseball diamond found outside, the library is nevertheless, relatively speaking, one of its most frequently used amenities. During the course of my fieldwork the space had become one of several retreats I used to write up my notes, allowing me to combine that laborious task with the more enjoyable endeavor of delving into the volumes on topics ranging from Aikido to Zen Buddhism. A former high school teacher in his mid-60s, Nakatani-san was one of several patrons I saw avail themselves of the free newspapers the library provides, doing so regularly enough to have established a seat that all who visited would leave for his use alone. As such, while sitting at one of the library’s desks typing at the keyboard of my laptop one morning, I immediately took notice when Nakatani-san arrived and instead of sitting in his usual spot chose to pick up a newspaper and take the chair opposite my own.

After flicking through the newspaper’s crisp pages for several minutes, Nakatai-san lent forward and addressed me from across the table in stilted English. “You are American?” Looking up and smiling, I informed him in Japanese that I was, in fact, British. This was information that

he pondered briefly before continuing, again in English. “You speak Japanese. That’s good. I like to speak English. I am in a *gakkai* [“academic society”], a...club. We meet and give talks in English.” He then proceeded to pull out of his bag a heavy and well-used laptop, plug it in and after a minute of tapping at keys turn the screen to face me. As it turned out, Nakatani-san was going to give a talk to his club on the effects of radiation on agricultural crops in the Tōhoku region, the area most badly afflicted by the Fukushima Dai-Ichi nuclear disaster. He had prepared a script but was hoping that I would be able to read it over and correct the English, an unabashed request for assistance that would generally be considered incredibly forward were it asked of another Japanese person but, in my experience, the kind of favor sought from obvious foreigners on a not-infrequent basis. Eager to be of help and possessing a pre-existing interest in the disaster and its impact on farming, as well as time spent studying and reading about its effects, I happily spent the next couple of hours going through the text and explaining in a mix of English and Japanese where I thought it might be altered to convey more effectively the meaning he seemed to want to transmit. So began one of the few isolated relationships I made in the field. One that never physically extended beyond the walls of that small library but nonetheless provided insight into the history of the corner of Japan in which it lay.

Over the months that followed, Nakatani-san and I would speak on occasion, most often when we were the only two occupying the library room, and discuss our interests.¹⁷ One day, after I had picked a copy of *Misaki-shi* from its shelf (an exhaustive account of the history of the former-town that is kept in all of the city’s libraries along with Isumi and Ōhara’s own equivalents), an example of one of our shared interests became evident. Clearly excited to see my choice of reading,

¹⁷ The library helpfully posted an extensive list of rules and expectations for its users on both sides of its door, with “Talking Forbidden” underlined and written in bold.

Nakatani-san revealed that the subject he had taught as a high school teacher was history and that Isumi's local history was a personal passion of his. From then on, whenever I had questions about events that had occurred in the past—the Meiji Restoration, the introduction of Western agricultural methods, World War II, to name but a few—and how they had impacted the region of Isumi, I would raise them first with him. Of these, his elaboration on the topic of how Isumi came to gain its name proved far more enthralling and arguably dubious than I could have imagined.

The first recorded mention of the district from which the city of Isumi would later adopt its name is found in the 8th century text known as the *Kojiki* (“Records on Ancient Matters”), followed shortly thereafter by the *Nihon Shoki* (“Chronicles of Japan”). Owing to their preeminence as volumes devoted to tracing the protohistory of the nation from its mythic creation and on into the era following its divine bestowment upon humanity, these texts are of great importance when studying the ethnogenesis of the Japanese people and, by extension, determining the roots from which they are said to have grown. One might therefore assume that in taking on a name inspired by a historical antecedent, the mayors of Ōhara, Isumi and Misaki simply sought to apply a veneer of historicity to their modern creation. A factor separating historical Isumi from the present-day city and one I would often raise with my informants, however, presents itself in the decision that was made to abandon the *kanji* rendition of the name in favor of a purely syllabic script.¹⁸ Despite the district's name having been written a variety of different ways since its initial documentation, each of which carried implied meanings through the choice of Chinese characters used, in 2005

¹⁸ Written Japanese uses both logographic kanji (Chinese characters) and syllabic kana, consisting of hiragana (used in some native words and for grammatical elements) and katakana (reserved primarily for non-native words and for emphasis). Kanji may stand for a word or phrase in isolation but may also be combined to create more complex expressions or names that would not be conveyed to the same extent orally as they would in text. As a result, sharing a name does not rely solely on an identical phonetic reading of the characters but also entails the same characters being used and consensus on their meaning being achieved.

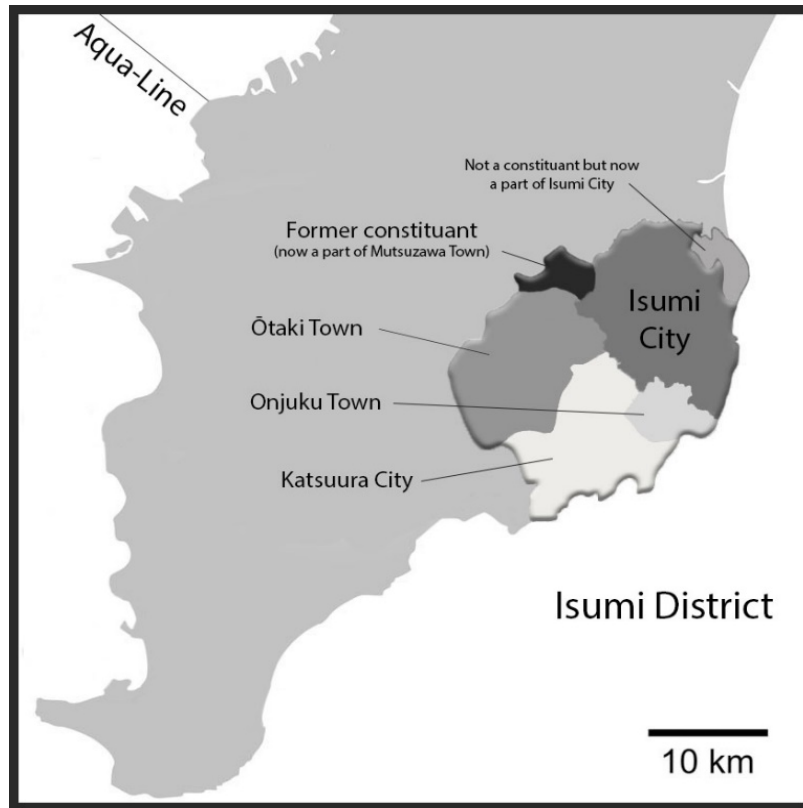
these were all judged unsuitable. Amounting to the abandonment of multiple symbolic representations that came about during the district's long history, anthropologically speaking this may be read as a willful severing of one of the many "webs of significance" that for Clifford Geertz constituted the amorphous concept of culture; an essential abstraction responsible for maintaining cohesion among conglomerations of people that might otherwise collapse under the weight of their inherent diversity. In spite of this cynical reading, I would contend that a subtle justification is present if one examines the interactions between the historical imaginations contained in myth and that which Benedict Anderson argued takes place in the present day (Anderson 1983).¹⁹

While adoption of the syllabic script of *hiragana* was not entirely uncommon in instances of civic naming prompted by the Heisei period's spate of municipal consolidations, the answers to the question of what motivated the decision to abandon kanji in the case of Isumi City often conflicted with each other. These ranged from the purely practical given to me by city officials, to Nakatani-san's allegation of a concerted effort to erase negative associations tied to a written version of the name that had been used for generations. On the side of the practical lay the fact that the region to which the first iterations of the name was applied accounted for a land area of more than twice that of the contemporary city, stretching further inland to the west and following the coast down to the south. In fact, these portions of the district actually persist as a distinct geographic and statistical unit, creating something of a discrepancy owing to Isumi City now technically not being included in the extant (through fractured) Isumi District of old. An official and equally plausible justification that I heard was that rendering the name in hiragana conveyed the impression that something new was being created while still paying homage to the past. In

¹⁹ Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) proposes that all communities are socially constructed rather than being based on any objective empirical quality.

spite of the plausibility of this temperate explanation, there are certainly qualities of the most recent of the characters used in writing Isumi District and Town that led me to ponder whether accusations that the name had been sanitized might indeed have some merit.

In order to explore these qualities, it is necessary to look back more than 1,000 years and analyze, interpret and discuss the role of a name, as well as how it may provide a tantalizing glimpse of the changing nature of the place it designates. This is especially necessary in a case such as that of Isumi, as it is apparent that the development of the name hints at an evolving relationship between the region and the Japanese nation-state; a relationship that has parallels with that of the new city. To speak again through an analogy drawn from human genealogy, like a legacy acknowledged by granting a shared name to a descendent, Isumi City is legitimated but also bears a burden conveyed by its ancestor's reputation. Examining the development of this reputation over time, as well as why it can be argued to have been both disavowed and celebrated, allows one to comprehend the ambitions of those hoping to craft for the city a modern, future-looking identity.



Map 2. Isumi District at the turn of the 19th century, with modern municipalities named

In its first recorded use within the *Kojiki*, Isumi District is referred to as Ijimu (伊自牟) (Isumi District 2012), while the *Nihon Shoki* calls it Ijimi no Kuni (伊甚國) (Seisaku 2020). Although neither of these names coincide precisely in the Chinese characters they use or their number, they are phonetically similar and, if one accepts a theory that Nakatani-san used to explain their origin, possess additional qualities that unite them. The theory he extolled was that the first character in the versions found in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki* were used simply for emphasis, while the following character/s (read as either *jimu* or *jimi*) were arbitrarily chosen to represent particular sounds that did hold *very* particular meaning. Uttered alone and with the Japanese practice of converting an ‘s’ to a ‘j’ when preceded by some other characters dropped, one is left with *shimu* or *shimi*. These sounds allegedly reference an archaic version of the verb *someru* [“to dye cloth”] that was earlier also pronounced *shimu/shimiru*. It was thus assumed by Nakatani-san that both of

these names sought to convey that the region was one well-known for “fabric dying” and, in the case of Ijimi no Kuni (*kuni* translatable as “country” or “realm”), “the realm of fabric dying”. To back this supposition further, he pointed me to records from Japan’s Heian period (794-1185) that demonstrate that taxes sent from the area to the capital in what is now Kyoto were paid in large part in *kōka*, a variety of safflower used throughout history in the dying of fabric (Kōka Reference Library 1994).

What I consider particularly notable on studying these names is less the industry they imply may have been intensively conducted in the area (though that is in itself fascinating), but more so the political implication of the *Nihon Shoki*’s use of “Ijimi no Kuni”. The distance of Ijimu/Ijimi would have been sufficient to place it outside of the sphere of influence of the nascent Japanese State developing approximately 500km away in the Kansai region. Despite this, the distance was not so great that trade between the two was prevented, with it apparently having earned a reputation as a place tied to a particular industry. This would have made its description as a realm (and thus a place outside that inhabited by the court scribe writing on it) in the case of Ijimi a logical choice and one indicating that full incorporation within the growing political hegemony had not yet been achieved. The fact that the practice of appending “no Kuni” ceased entirely during the era of territorial expansion that occurred in the later Heian period would seem to imply that as Ijimi no Kuni was increasingly assimilated by the dominant political system, its status as independent ceased to be acknowledged.

While incorporation would not have necessitated an immediate change in the region’s horticultural practices, evidenced by the quantity and form of taxes paid to the Heian government being consistent with the connotations of the pre-existing name it bore, the appellation of the region did subsequently evolve. Ijimu/Ijimi next became Ishimi (夷瀧), a name that includes a highly

ironic choice of character considering the closer ties the region now had with Japanese central authority. Though the second of these two characters is simply an archaic component of a word formerly used to describe an abundance of water, *shinsui* (瀧水), the first was and continues to be commonly used to refer to the *Emishi* (夷),²⁰ a catchall term that has historically been deployed derogatorily to label groups not deemed members of the Yamato culture that rose to power in Japan during the 4th century. Comparatively speaking, the term bears similarity to the English-language use of the word “barbarian”, in the sense that it creates a generalized Other stereotyped as primitive and contrasted with the supposedly civilized qualities of the group prone to using the term. Induction into the Japanese State, then, seems to have, in combination with its location at its margins, ironically resulted in the idiom “familiarity breeds contempt” coming to pass. This implication of a marginalized status in which the inhabitants of Ishimi are given a name that casts them as uncivilized was then compounded by the popular adoption of a more commonly used and easily written kanji for the second character of the name, one that played on the negative connotations of “Emishi” by pairing it with the kanji for “recess” or “corner”, read *sumi* (隅). The “realm of fabric dying” located on a distant and inaccessible peninsula, Ijimi, thus became Isumi (夷隅), the “recess of barbarians”.

As Japan developed into a nation-state over the following centuries, the application of the seemingly pejorative “Isumi” only became more commonplace. This occurred to such a degree that little physical evidence of the Ishimi version of the name now remains, with the small Isumi Shrine dedicated to the region containing just one inscription of what would be the older version

²⁰ The groups of people who actually comprised the category known as the Emishi is a topic still hotly debated, as is whether it can be applied to any one ethnicity.

were it not for a subtle error in the engraving in which the left radical is replaced (濶 → 濶). This move towards Isumi as its sole name can be said to have been definitively completed when Tokugawa Ieyasu achieved political and military authority over the country around the early 1600s, as it was from that point on that it came to be officially recognized as the standard version. And so, despite Ieyasu having moved the nation's political capital almost 500km closer by relocating it to Edo (later to become Tokyo), Isumi's divisive name was for the time being fixed. A place confined by its location on a peninsula across the bay from the nation's new urban center was thus likewise confined to a name applied by elite outsiders who judged the slight appropriate owing to what amounted to a paradoxically perceptible marginality.

In light of this stigma who would fault the founders of Isumi City for expunging the name of negative implications by taking on an entirely different one that would not label them as either uncivilized or outsiders? Only those for whom the allure of even an uncertain historicity is a distinction difficult to resist.

A Local Legend: Journey to the East

There is another theory that Nakatani-san related to me on one of those occasions that we were alone together in the confines of Misaki Library. A theory born of legend that posits a very different origin for Isumi District's name. One that even goes so far as to forge a connection between his home and some of the most important members of Japan's pantheon of Shinto deities. Apparently little known even among Isumi's residents, it proposes a venerable association that might help to explain the attraction of perpetuating a sanitized version of a name born out of a relationship where the civility of one party has been called into question. Though based on pure conjecture due to the events it recounts having occurred (if they occurred at all) before written records began, it provides a means of reimagining an aspersion as a relic of an antiquity that traces Isumi's origins

to the front of the nation's ethnic religion. In doing so, perhaps its potential as a historical gloss that can be used to paint over the region's more recent image played a role in warranting its retention, if only in the spoken tongue.

The site of the genesis of Isumi, according to this second theory, allegedly lies 800km to the west in the precinct of Izumo Grand Shrine, one of the most ancient Shinto shrines in all of Japan. Legend has it that the sun goddess Amaterasu dedicated Izumo to Ōkuninushi, the god of nation-building, in thanks for bestowing Japan upon her grandson, Ninigi-no-Mikoto, who was himself responsible for rice agriculture and grandfather to the legendary first emperor, Jimmu. This affiliation with the founding of the nation is evident in the contents of both the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, that despite being commissioned at a time when power had become consolidated further east contained legends largely centered on the province (also known as Izumo) in which Izumo Grand Shrine lay. On top of that (or perhaps more accurately “below that”), archeological study of the area has uncovered some of the largest caches of bronze weapons ever found in Japan (Kidder 2007), demonstrating that even if myth were to be entirely discounted ample physical evidence exists that points towards Izumo being a region in which major political power arose on the Japanese archipelago, only later becoming overshadowed by the expansion of the Yamato polity.²¹

The affiliation between Isumi and Izumo is not based upon phonic similarity, as it was in the case of the association drawn between the oldest versions of Isumi's name and the dying of fabric, but precisely the linguistic element discounted by the first theory, the significance of the characters used in the writing of Ijimi (伊甚). A short distance from the grand shrine's location on the coast

²¹ The Yamato polity was a pattern of administrative control that grew out of the Asuka region of central Japan, later becoming synonymous with the country as its rulers suppressed competing clans throughout its islands.

of the Sea of Japan one finds Ijimi Shrine (伊基神社), a sub-shrine of the former that shares all aspects of the name given to Isumi District in the Nihon Shoki but for the character that indicated its status as a realm. What is more, if one were to walk an equally short distance from the site at which Isumi became a city in 2005, one would find a shrine named for Izumo. Thus, at opposite sides of the country two shrines exist named for the province in which the other lay when records first began. Hakatani-san postulated that prior to the 8th century the name that later evolved into Isumi may have been conveyed to the region by practitioners of the foundational religion of the still-coalescing Japanese empire during the process of spreading its tenets to what, from their perspective, would have been its remotest easterly outpost.

Now, knowledge of the incredible number of Shinto shrines located throughout the islands of Japan and the resulting likelihood of multiple examples bearing the same name might justly lead one to discount as entirely fanciful my informant's conclusion that Isumi was settled by a branch of a religious order at the heart of the nation's foundation. Yet one further observation does make the argument more seductive. If one were to travel due east from Izumo Grand Shrine, waking every morning and heading in the direction of the rising sun and continuing on until only the wide expanse of the Pacific Ocean blocked your path, you would find yourself within 20km of the very auditorium at which Isumi City was born. Bisecting the nation from coast to coast along a line of latitude drawn from its ancient heart to its outer extremity, it is Isumi District that marks the point at which you would terminate the act. This was the suggestion that Nakatani-san made while tapping at the yellowing map of Japan found within the Misaki-shi, smiling as he encouraged me to ponder whether perhaps Isumi has always been intimately tied to the center of nation, yet forever defined through its location at its periphery.



Map 3. Sites associated with the second account of Isumi's origin

Despite their charm, the extravagant speculations of Nakatani-san on the route by which the city of Isumi might have come upon its name fall within the uncomfortable category of hearsay—that form of discourse which is most treacherous to a researcher in pursuit of an objective account of the past or present. When raising his theories with other interlocutors and asking for their own assessment of their potential validity, I was most often met by an apologetic deferment for lack of knowledge or a skeptical tilt of the head coupled with the challenge that such things are quite unknowable. What is in no doubt, however, is that despite Nakatani-san's explanations undoubtedly describing both experienced and imagined events, they both combine to influence his conception of his own identity and his relationship with a home mediated not only by the contemporary but also by a personal interpretation of history. As Marilyn Strathern observed when questioning anthropological perceptions of the historical process in post-contact Melanesia

(Strathern 1990), data gathered in the field often results from desires and idealized conceptions that nevertheless have the potential to influence political transformation but without necessarily being grounded in the epistemically biased notion of “fact.” Rather, aspirations, however fanciful, represent agency on the part of the ethnographic subjects ripe for anthropological interpretation. The decision of the mayors of Isumi, Ōhara and Misaki Towns to carry the name “Isumi” forward struck both Nakatani-san and myself as extremely appropriate, for the reimagination of the area as a city capable of development thereby became an extension of a long and possibly inevitable process of cultural transmission that has drawn and continues to draw that which lies at a nation’s extreme towards its core.

Historical Imagination and the State of Nations

While folkloric narratives drawn from the distant past may not be frequently raised topics within everyday discourse concerning identity, their influence both historically and in the contemporary world does have potency. The incorporation of distant regions within a dominion seeking to consolidate its borders has long relied on the evocation of shared foundational myths or histories in order to bring about successful symbiosis but without necessarily projecting those beliefs into everyday consciousness. Within classical European history, for example, the Trojan hero Aeneas was proactively assimilated into Roman mythology as a distant ancestor of the city’s legendary founders, Romulus and Remus, despite hailing from an area outside of the empire’s locus of power. What motivated this textual relocation of the crucible from which Rome was forged to the fires of Troy was arguably its ability to be used as good propaganda. The tale’s narrative was useful due to it uniting Rome’s diffuse peoples under a shared Greco-Roman legend at a time in which civil war was still in living memory. It is necessary to note, however, that conditions that allow such a reimagining to be successful hang on a relationship of dominance and subordination that favors

those doing the rewriting over the group whose mythology is being appropriated. Separation of the core and periphery is also required as it allows the implications of written history to rest safely above the messy activities and ideologies of the ordinary people who might defy it. To reference again the discourse of Nakatani-san, while the mayors of Ōhara, Isumi and Misaki might consciously or subconsciously wish to give credence to narratives that tie them to the site of Japan's prehistoric foundation, without this narrative being adopted as canon its ability to shape the identity of the city's inhabitants in the eyes of outsiders is, like Achilles at Troy, hamstrung.

To understand the potential of Isumi residents to usefully deploy historical imagination as a tool in identity building vis-à-vis the Japanese nation-state one can look to comparisons with the likes of Cretan sheep rustlers living at the extremes of the Greek territory during the 1970s. Studied by Michael Herzfeld (2003) and entwined in the same Hellenic mythology invoked by Rome in its own premodern statecraft, they, like the residents of Isumi, experience subordination to an economic, political and cultural center able to dictate the terms of their depiction. Whereas Chiba Prefecture has become associated with Japanese subcultures such as *yankii*, working-class gangs of delinquents who have adopted a rebelliousness inspired by an American youth, and the notorious *bōsōzoku* biker gangs (暴走族),²² Herzfeld's informants suffer denigration for their own breed of lawlessness. In spite of this prejudice, Herzfeld's Cretan sheep rustlers do at least figure within a historical narrative in which their oft-disparaged activities are adulated for their association with an "essential Greek masculinity" and anti-authoritarianism alleged to have underpinned the 19th century overthrow of the Ottoman Empire. As a result, their behavior is placed on a pedestal when it is deemed advantageous to do so by those in power at the country's

²² Rising to prominence in the 1980s, in a cruel twist of fate the "running wild tribes" just so happen to have a name that is a homophone of the "tribes of Bōsō" (房総族).

core. The youth cultures and implicated general population of Chiba possess no such romantic alternative interpretation in the eyes of Japan's conformist majority and amend their reputation on a national scale. Yet despite their limited ability to turn prejudice to empowerment by taking on a new name, Isumi's founders chose to neither entirely abandon it nor use it to promote a mythology surrounding that might have some influence on the opinions of an external audience.

In pursuing an answer to the question of why Isumi was chosen, and chosen in a phonetic form, the only conclusion I have reached other than its administrators simply electing to follow the trend of the time, is the specific objective of revitalizing the city by way of inward migration. With replenishment of the population widely deemed necessary for the survival of Japan's countryside (Matanle & Rausch 2011), いすみ ["Isumi" – phonetic script] provides distinct advantages while going some way to undo what could be construed as disadvantages. Retention of a historically sourced yet sanitized version of the name can be used to attract those driven from the cities by a rapacious modernity, but without direct reference to the "backwardness" of its past implied by the kanji. For an audience keen to absorb a romantic image of the region and willing (if not keen) to travel to the hinterlands to do so, a purely phonetic "Isumi" possesses historicity without the connotations a historical smear. At the same time, the choice of the phonetic rendering places it in the company of other amalgamated municipalities each striving to achieve their own modernization project. This has the added effect of granting locals the ability to redress the balance of power with those emanating from the core upon their arrival, restaging the relationship between center and periphery in their own backyards. Under these conditions, identity may be negotiated pragmatically, bringing them an approximation of agency Cretan sheep rustlers possess when negotiating their relationship with the modern Greek state that subsumes and suppresses them (as best they can).

Through contestable and to an extent contradictory, the ability to deploy fluidly the various explanations for how Isumi got its name according to context (local to local, local to newcomer, local and outsider, etc.) optimizes the advantages of those that understand and reference them. The ambiguity surrounding the origins of Isumi's name, then, becomes a source of discursive flexibility rather than simply a loss of meaning. While its reputation is not erased, those in Isumi have reduced the fields in which they are subordinated in determining how *it*, their home, is written.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Sewing’ a Field

Arrivals

Whenever I have attempted to explain my research to those unfamiliar with Isumi, the image generated in their minds of my field site generally failed to capture its large size and patchwork quality. Having tasked myself with studying social change in contemporary Japanese agricultural communities during an era of rural decline, the “city” has not generally been anticipated as the relevant scale of analysis. Nevertheless, Isumi, a city at least in name, is sprawling if not particularly urban. A happenstance amalgam of hill and plain, forest and dune, field and port constituting a recently defined whole, its location on Japan’s Bōsō Peninsula places it not an insurmountable distance from the bustle of Tokyo, yet in far more an intimate affiliation with the vast and often passed over Pacific Ocean that constitutes its eastern border.²³ What is more, “Isumi” is also the name given to a district, a town, a river, a railway; a veritable panoply of denoted places. This means that to studying the city of Isumi, in the eyes of insiders, outsiders and myself, exceeds the topics and associations one might expect of research grounded in farming and community. The traits of Isumi are such a medley, in fact, that during the course of preparing for my two years spent living there my arrival by two different modes of transport colored my impression of the place in two entirely different ways.

²³ For a critical reflection on the prevalent macroeconomic and macropolitical tendency to overlook the Pacific region and cast it as one made up of islands that are “much too small, too poorly endowed with resources and too isolated from the centers of economic growth for their inhabitants ever to be able to rise above their present condition of dependence”, see Epele Hau’ofa’s *Our Sea of Islands* (1993).

By Road

Having left the bright lights of Yokohama that shine 24/7 on the western shore of Tokyo Bay on a balmy mid-summer night, my car and I descended into the tunnel of the Aqua-Line expressway. Owing to the tunnel/bridge combination spanning just two thirds of the distance from coast to coast rather than fording the bay in its entirety, 20 minutes later my vehicle burst forth from beneath the water at the tiny artificial island of Umihotaru (“ocean firefly”) and transitioned to the bridge-come-causeway that penetrates deep into Chiba Prefecture. Rather than remaining any longer than necessary on the expensive toll road that would gradually sweep me north and away from my destination, I instead dove into the mountains that run down the spine of the Bōsō Peninsula in pursuit of a more direct path. Ascending to my route’s highest point by the break of dawn, I crossed the western edge of Isumi some 30 minutes later, just as the roadway became less precipitous yet more enveloped by trees. The scenes revealed before me gave the impression of a land barely disturbed by industry.

When the winding road following the contours of the undulating terrain was not wholly shrouded by the dark trunks and canopy of the Japanese red-cedar that dominate local forests, my eyes caught brief glimpses of long-abandoned rice terraces wedged in narrow valleys, drained and overgrown. Progressing onwards through this highland region, except for the occasional nondescript tin-roofed shed or faded vermilion torii marking the entrance to a vegetation-enveloped shrine,²⁴ signs of activity were sparse. Yet as my vehicle sailed over the quiet landscape, constant but subtle evidence of great labor lay all around, only draped in shades of dusky green and brown. The uniform planting of the trees, for example, demonstrated that human hands and

²⁴ A torii is a traditional Japanese gate commonly placed at the entrance of a Shinto shrine or found within its grounds. Its purpose is to denote the point at which one departs the mundane and enters an area of sanctity.

not the fickle temperament of the wind were responsible for their arrangement, while the mirror-like ponds that provided the unfolding vista an occasional shock of blue on that sunny morning were confined by steep and grass-covered embankments, unnatural in their composition. Still, it was easy in that moment to ignore those and other impositions on my better judgement and imagine I was passing through a forgotten land.

Eventually the road began to split more frequently and the possibility of following unkempt tracks branching off both left and right, leading to what I could only guess were little used or vacated forestry stations, drew my attention but could not alter my impression that this was a place in a state of lasting dormancy. Simultaneous with this transition to a land of more overt signs of human exploitation, my vehicle began a prolonged descent and the treeless valleys that had so recently seemed aberrations in an environment in which swarthy conifer reigned supreme, gradually began to grow wider and usurp the position of the landscape's principal feature. Broad shafts of sunlight now began to fall from above, ricocheting off the tarmac and illuminating the brush that until then had seemed dark and foreboding.

My course suddenly swung sharply left and down, and I dropped from the hills onto a road that skirted an expansive plain given over to rice paddies in which the emerald plants jostled for space while beginning to nod under the weight of their burgeoning load. Here the waters of the small streams that upland had been gathered into those deep, pond-like reservoirs became visible again, only conveyed through irrigation channels that ran parallel with the road, feeding adjacent fields where the growing heat was now shedding plants of their dewy veneer. Whereas in the elevated terrain the dilapidated plots that these waters once nourished had appeared hemmed in by the precipitous landscape, compressed like the mortar of a cobblestone street, here the rice fields were

free to spread into the far distance. It became the *aze*,²⁵ earthen ridges used to separate the paddies into manageable parcels, that resembled mortar, while the fields reminded me of the flat slabs of irregularly shaped stone that might be laid together to form a garden path.

Traversing this tended farmland, I soon began to pass by occupied houses. Some stood with their backs nestled tightly against the now waning hillsides, partially concealed behind decorative trees and shrubbery, while others unabashedly infringed on the level ground otherwise given up to planting. Those built adjacent to the slopes often appeared ancient, exposing weathered, wooden frames upon which steeply-pitched roofs dressed in gray tiles shaped like ocean waves shimmered in the daylight, while their more low-lying neighbors feigned such characteristics, replacing wood and plaster walls with panels of light cement, and tiles with brushed sheet-metal or plastic. These latter homes, while brazen in their modernity, did retain some more established features such as a hipped roof or walled garden, raising a toast to their vintage neighbors.

It was not until I had travelled several miles further east, where the landscape became more fully that of open country, that I started to come across any significant degree of human activity. At intersections I began to meet the small k-trucks²⁶ that are a ubiquitous presence throughout the Japanese countryside, laden with what, to my eyes, appeared equally miniature farming equipment. Many of the fields I passed here were being actively tended to ensure that all necessary maintenance was conducted before the sun rose too high above the horizon. One elderly man dressed in immaculate white overalls was distributing plant feed with the aid of a machine

²⁵ Owing to the need to distribute water across the paddy evenly, the effective distribution of *aze* is one of the most integral aspects of rice farming. Though they were once composed of rock and soil and constructed to follow the gradient of the landscape, heavy machinery is being used to flatten land and remove *aze* in order to increase field sizes. Where they do remain, concrete alternatives have often been installed to decrease maintenance costs.

²⁶ A “k-truck” takes its name from the reading of the kanji for “light,” and features a small cab and flatbed capable of carrying an object the size of a three-seater sofa. Driven at sometimes alarming speeds around the country’s road network, they are ideal for navigating the narrow byways found in the countryside.

resembling a back-mounted vacuum cleaner. Rather than sucking up dust this heavy-looking device spewed pellets of concentrated fertilizer from the paddy's bank all the way to its flooded center. This was clearly a task that would become infinitely less tolerable once the temperature became sweltering later in the day and the burden of an engine strapped to one's back more difficult to bear.

Driving on, larger structures also now became more commonplace, with granaries sporting dazzling chrome cylinders meters-high arrayed at their exteriors rising over my car as I moved at ever-greater speed along straighter and wider roads. Fields, homes and other properties that in higher ground had been more defined owing to my slower pace began to blur together as they shot past the windows of my vehicle, while pedestrians or those working their land had ceased to register at all. It was these fast roads that thereafter carried me to my destination, the place that my family and I had arranged to call home for the following two years, just as the chimes broadcast throughout the region at 7am rang out to mark the start of a new day.²⁷

By Rail

Standing in front of the departures board of a busy railway station several weeks later, I was pondering a choice while once again travelling to my new home in Isumi. On the one hand, I could board the midday express leaving in a little over an hour. The express would take me from my location in Chiba City, a satellite of Tokyo and the capital of the prefecture that shares its name, to Ōhara Station, the largest of the five stations on the Sotobō Line that lie within Isumi's city

²⁷ The brief chimes played over the public address system every morning throughout Isumi have several objectives. Their most utilitarian purpose is to test of the *shichōson bōsai gyōsei musen hōsō* (municipal disaster prevention administrative radio broadcast), a system in place throughout the country that has been co-opted for the additional task of encouraging all and sundry to rise promptly each morning and to remind schoolchildren that it is time to return home come dusk.

limits.²⁸ After arriving there I would then be faced with a long and expensive taxi ride to the village in which my house lay. On the other hand, I could elect to use a local train that would take a significant time longer but deposit me within a healthy walking distance of my final destination and would be leaving in under half an hour. Both of these options provided a stark contrast to the regularity of the service I had grown accustomed to while living closer to the center of the Greater Tokyo Area.²⁹ Opting for the second, cheaper though more time-consuming option, sometime later I boarded a yellow and blue-flashed, four-car train of indeterminate age and spent the next one hour and twenty minutes gazing out of its windows and examining the changing landscape as we gradually drew away from the metropolis.

The scene visible when first exiting Chiba Station was one of pervasive urban sprawl.³⁰ Medium-sized apartment blocks and smaller houses of similar design to the modern homes I had seen when driving into Isumi weeks earlier dominated my view, though among them were scattered numerous convenience stores, bookshops, chain restaurants and other businesses. The tracks on which my train ran skirted major roads along which countless cars crawled, stopping and starting as they arrived at every traffic light-governed intersection. On this journey, rather than conifer lining the route in silent repose, it was a forest of utility poles and humming electricity pylons that I was carried through, providing but a threadbare steel canopy that granted no shade to shield me from the sun's glare.

²⁸ The Sotobō Line's name is a portmanteau, combining *soto* (外), meaning "outer," and *Bōsō* (房総), the peninsula it serves. Following the coast for a significant portion of its length, it has its opposite in the Uchibō Line, that runs along the *uchi* (内) or "inner" side of the peninsula in parallel with the shoreline of Tokyo Bay. This distinction bears some symbolic weight as the inside/outside dichotomy has, in Japanese social custom, historically been used to distinguish in and out-groups and thus implies a degree of Otherizing of those who fall in the latter category.

²⁹ The Greater Tokyo Area consists of the Tokyo Metropolis, as well as several outlying prefectures including Chiba.

³⁰ Near-totally destroyed during World War II as a result of it being a center of military production, Chiba city expanded outwards during the postwar decades through intensive rebuilding and land reclamation.

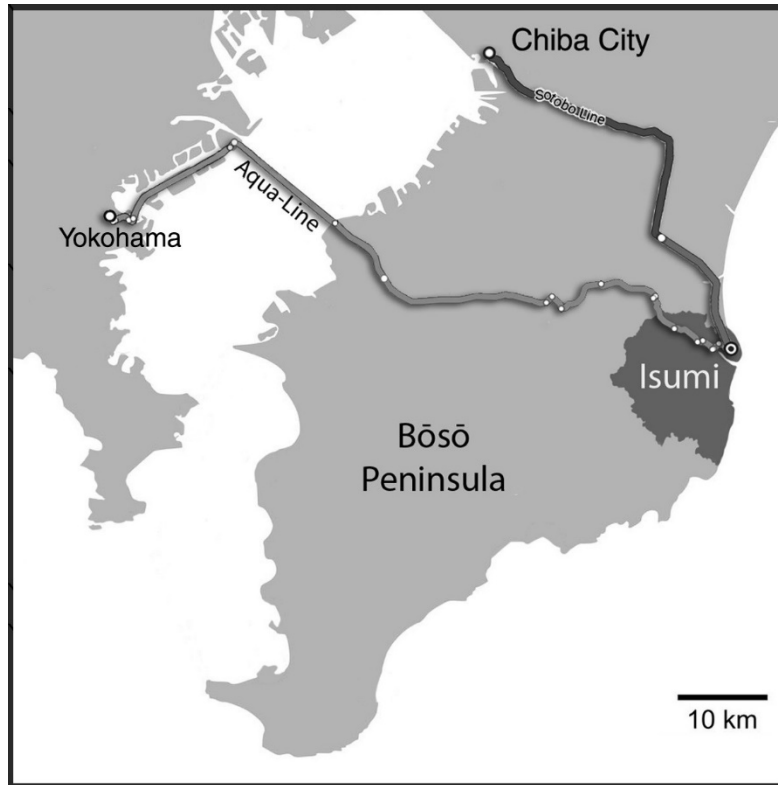
After hastening away from the city for some time, the residential buildings and commercial properties gave way to large tracts of open farmland devoted mostly to vegetables. These were being worked by heavy tractors with tinted cabin windows and powerful headlamps, respectively designed to protect their occupants from the summer sunshine during the day and illuminate their paths as they worked on into the night. Once beyond this broad belt of industrial farming, I was conveyed though an area surrendered to another form of the production, that of manufacturing. Squat factories dispersed across my view belched out white smoke that hung low over the horizon, creeping across the skyline until eventually dissipating and becoming indistinguishable from the haze. Communication masts painted in stripes of red and white loomed large, strategically colored to contrast bluntly with their surroundings. The only habitable structure that sought to rise up over this cityscape instead of spreading outwards at ground level was a massive, thick-set apartment complex that I learned had been built to house employees of many of the manufacturing firms located nearby. It was at a station located in this industrial district that many of my fellow travelers disembarked and I continued on my way, increasingly alone.

Having bisected the northern Bōsō Peninsula the train's path now followed the coast southward and began to provide intermittent glimpses of the Pacific Ocean. A wide, sandy bay was visible in the distance and, by squinting, I was able to spot black specks on the water that could be nothing other than surfers awaiting waves.³¹ Though there were clearly buildings and businesses that catered to the shoreline's patrons, even while travelling at speed it was clear from their appearance that they were neglected. Box-shaped shops constructed of greying concrete were rent by fissures, the result of earth tremors that take place every now and then, and sported faded signage whose

³¹ 66km long, Kujūkuri Beach stretches unbroken along approximately one half of Chiba's Pacific-facing seacoast and despite now being known primarily as a favorite haunt of surfers was actually the planned landing site for the invasion of Honshu, had Japan not ended World War II by surrendering on August 15th, 1945 (Skates 1994).

garish designs were well past their prime. Homes constructed partially of corrugated iron painted either blue for the roofs or left untreated for the walls, while the exception to the rule, gave some of the dwellings here a ramshackle quality out of sorts with aspirations for modernity.

As I briefly mulled over the implications of bringing my family to an area where evidence of dubious vitality was so readily on display, the train swung inland between an outcrop of high ground and a small lake I knew lay at the northern border of Isumi. The ocean disappeared entirely from view and I was met by a small valley dominated by orchards enclosed in anti-insect netting. These contained the intentionally stunted trees responsible for one of the crops the vicinity is known for, the Japanese species of pear known as *nashi*. It was not long thereafter that my train came to a brief stop at a small, three-platform station consisting of a couple of buildings and an automatic ticket gate and I alighted. I had arrived again at the base from which I would conduct my new life, a small corner of a much larger field site, only this time having seen it in a very different light. Stepping through the modest building that provided both an office to the solitary station manager and a waiting room for passengers, I contemplated the significance of the sights I had seen on my first journey east versus that which I had experienced on that day travelling south, and what my differing impressions meant when it came to achieving my ambition of establishing a coherent sense of place around which to conduct my study. Having reached my destination twice now, when would it be that I would actually “arrive” at Isumi?



Map 4. Two Routes into Isumi

Arrivals (Coda)

Long, often eloquent descriptions of the anthropologist's arrival in the field are a trademark of the discipline. From Evans Pritchard's (1940:9) account of his 1930 arrival in Nuerland during stormy weather to Beth Conklin's explanation of how she came to land at a village situated in an Amazonian reservation in 1985 (2001:16), I have always appreciated them for their ability to contextualize what is to follow despite their rapid, montage-like approach to writing that would risk coming across as shallow if it were not for its role in 'setting the scene.' They allow a writer to devote time to description that can have the power of allowing the reader to embody, at least superficially, the experience of the author as they first set foot in the field. In such passages both are narratively divorced from the point at which they will receive the insights of the hosts that await them and through which, one hopes, some form of enlightenment will later be achieved.

These ‘stories’ do, however, owing to their adoption of the technique of autobiography expose the anthropologist to some easy criticism.

In relaying my own first two ‘encounters’ with Isumi in a manner heavily grounded in the “I,” the contributions of innumerable fieldwork informants that played an integral role in bringing me to the point at which the writing could begin are entirely vacated. Instead, I have ensured all eyes are on me and the journeys that I took. On top of this, the Western literary tradition of autobiography, which produces many a work infused with ‘flowery anecdotes’ and the strategic abridgement of fact, finds its way into what the casual observer might assume to be a positivist report of a research experience. And for those in the know,³² that which was intended as a demonstration of a willingness to engage in self-scrutiny through illustrating that we all begin as ignorant newcomers (for why else need we go to the field?) remains a tempting target for accusations of narcissism. Reflexivity on the part of the anthropologist, that is to say, me, poses the risk of being conflated with an ungainly self-absorption.

The most readily available antidote to a case of suspected personal obsession is a style of reportage that consistently represses the ‘I’ in favor of the perspective of whichever non-self-referential pronoun is most appropriate. Relying solely on “He said...,” “she was...,” “they thought...” etc. the omniscient narrator is granted both authority and a hiding place. But hiding in plain sight also comes with downsides—god complexes bringing their own accusations of narcissism, most obviously. A more measured approach entails only permitting elaboration of one’s own tales in small doses, before then moving onto harder theory. Taking this avenue reminds the reader that the author’s perspective is that which gives rise to the ethnographic experience

³² By which I mean those familiar with the cultural turn in anthropology and the implications of adopting a reflexive method.

relayed through the text but not at the cost of granting its narrative point of origin excessive attention.

At its root, the fieldwork method is based on the principal of participant observation and my perspective as witness to the events described must, without doubt, be acknowledged.³³ Furthermore, though the interactions I describe are devoted to explicating the performance of an embodied knowledge that I (in most situations) lack, I have made myself responsible for attempting to acquire insight into this knowledge and then interpret it. And while autobiography's association with a Western individualism that stands in contrast to frequently observed inclinations towards collectivism on the part of the Japanese adds a modicum of irony to this, my adherence to the method is intended to do more than claim authority or simply remind the reader that I was there. My presence in the text demonstrates my participation in events and the reactions my actions prompted among my informants. This not only serves to signpost the conscious biases I possess on matters interpreted cross-culturally, but also leaves open a reader's ability to perceive the unconscious biases I possess and have yet to confront. While I may not be able to free myself from the "tyranny of hidden prejudices" (Gadamer 1989:270), I consider it necessary to leave the way clear for others to decipher them on my behalf.

'Sewing' a Field

That Isumi lacks the trappings that are often associated with a 'city' is without doubt. Its skyline is not adorned with high-rises, no central business district hums 24/7 with an energy generated by foot traffic and commerce, and it lacks a cultural hub to serve as a single common ground for discourse between locals and visitors alike. In fact, unless you have a specific destination in mind

³³ In this I look for inspiration particularly in the work of Dorinne Kondo (1990) and Ruth Behar (1993; 2011).

it's difficult to judge whether you have arrived there at all. You can *head into* Isumi, as I did by way of the network of mountain roads that weave there way over the peninsula when I first visited, or by the trainline that cleaves it down its decidedly more 'city-like' side that I used when I went again to commit to the house I would rent during my stay, but to be *in* Isumi is simply to have passed over what is, for the most part, an arbitrary line on a map.

Painting a picture of the geography of a place in its entirety, then, is no easy task. No single vista, however broad, encompasses all its characteristics. To stand rooted to the spot at the coast and look inland would grant insight into the regional importance of agriculture, for example, while turning one's back on the consequence of an equally defining aspect of the region, its fishing industry. Choosing instead to position oneself at either the northern, southern or western borders and gaze inward in such a way as to ensure both land and sea are visible (an impossible task without the benefit of a bird's eye view) means failing to acknowledge parts of neighboring jurisdictions previously included within that which the name "Isumi" once encapsulated. If in response to this difficulty in grasping Isumi City through observation from its edges I granted myself the luxury of a full 360-degree perspective sited within, the task of finding an axis around which the city revolves would likewise prove impossible. In the 1960s Roland Barthes judged Japan to be lacking in transcendence owing to the center of Tokyo being "empty"—in that it contains an empty signifier in the form of a figurehead whose home in the capital is a "site both forbidden and indifferent, a residence concealed beneath foliage, protected by moats, inhabited by an emperor who is never seen"—by his definition Isumi City lacks even a center, let alone one at which the "values of civilization are gathered and condensed" (Barthes 1982:32).

Owing to this dilemma, my description of Isumi entails the discussion of patches and threads; patches being those pockets of familiarity one gradually acquires through having visited people or

places on many occasions, while threads are the journeys one takes between such locales. Using such an approach, the conveyance of information about places can reference their participation in a larger network, be it the city or even the nation-state, but necessitates the acknowledgement that journeys travelled between patches of affinity do little more than expose one to an internally derived but detached familiarity. The two narrative threads I wove into the opening of this chapter, drawn as they were from two early and momentary encounters with locations and people (some that I would never become intimately affiliated with), must be combined with knowledge born out of greater acquaintance in order to portray more than a superficial rendition of the land in which I lived.

What eventually became evident to me while attempting to conceive of a means of accurately representing Isumi is that there will inevitably be uneven coverage, a thought that sits uncomfortably with the notion of empirically derived knowledge that social science once aspired to generate. The foundation of the field, and especially its subdiscipline of anthropology, was, after all, heavily influenced by the work of Émile Durkheim, a theorist driven by an express desire to reorient the academic study of society away from the interpretive stance of theology and towards a more practically applicable positivist outlook. Wishing to create a blueprint for what could be considered a 'legitimate scientific method,' at least in the eyes of those of an empirical persuasion, Durkheim deemed it necessary to establish impartiality on the part of the researcher and objectivity on the part of the data they collect. For all the 'legitimacy' this won the discipline, however, in consort with the wave of popularity that surrounded the misapplication of the evolutionary concepts of Charles Darwin (Mayr 1993), his methods had the unfortunate side effect of providing a spurious ideological justification for a colonial system that took anthropology's research topics, otherwise known as 'natives and their cultures', and drew thick, black borders around

geographically and placed them on an allochronic spectrum. At its worst, this act resulted in their imprisonment both in space and in time. Nevertheless, the late-19th Century reductionist tendency of delineating cultural groups to the point that a field site might be contained within a unitary and clearly defined whole remained a seductive prospect to me as I sought a method of containing the inchoate field of my experiences in Isumi within a clear border.

Despite my work requiring my reluctant abandonment of the illusion that I could truly ‘know the city’ in a complete sense, the collage created through patches and threads does present advantages. Speaking in terms of changeable accretions rather than a single, static whole acknowledges the passage of time and the transitory nature of human relationships. Considering this helped prevent me from failing to grant due weight to the significance of internal plurality in the outlooks of all my many informants, something that might be pushed to the side when attempting to make conclusions regarding people living within more historically defined boundaries. Intentional or not, anthropological works have in the past had a tendency towards appearing to totalize their subjects—*The Nuer*, by Evans Pritchard, and *Yanomamö: The Fierce People*, by Napoleon Chagnon (1968) being a couple of examples where a simple title may have such an effect. Even within cities that can be said to possess a center capable of meeting the expectations of Roland Barthes, on proceeding outwards from that core through an unbroken urban landscape one often finds oneself encountering the local equivalents of former village greens, estate houses or rustic shrines surrounded by architecture that creates in them islands of history. These spots, while perhaps long ago consumed by the outwardly marching city, help us to comprehend the legacy of a past that may still reside nearby embodied in the identities of those now known principally as citizens.

Patches and Threads

Isumi still possesses many village greens, estate houses and rustic shrines, but lacks the urban space to fill the gaps between them. Its overwhelmingly patchwork quality becomes evident with only a scant viewing. There is simply no expansive cityscape in place able to consume its rurality. Its dispersed population of a little under 38,000 spread out across myriad settlements within area of just over 150 square kilometers, in 1889 the same territory consisted of fifty-five villages and a single town (Table 1). My own home lay in a remnant of this more fractious state, a place that would doubtless hold great allure to an anthropologist for whom village studies possess a romantic attraction. Perched on an elevated plateau adjacent to the Isumi River some 4km from where it enters the Pacific, it has many of the characteristics that one might associate with a large community capable of sustaining a modest self-sufficiency. There is a *shōtengai* [“shopping street”] along which several family-run and local franchise stores stand, variously selling household goods, clothes and agricultural supplies; two restaurants, one with a menu that predominantly caters to the ample appetites of those who practice frequent physical labor and are thus more partial to gorge themselves on copious amounts of rice and meat, the other offering sushi crafted with locally-caught seafood that aspires to serve a more discerning clientele; as well as a post office, a kindergarten, an elementary school and a branch of the JA (Japan Agriculture) Bank, the largest private financial institution in the country and one that specializes in offering credit to participants in the farming and fishing industries. These, in addition to the shrine built atop a protuberant hill that resembles a great forested boulder inexplicably deposited on the village’s doorstep, as well as a Buddhist temple located within the warren of streets that constitute its most

densely populated area, tick the boxes necessary to assume the role of ‘village’ in Japanese popular imagination.³⁴

Surrounding the village on all sides and occasionally tucked between adjacent properties are rice fields and the occasional vegetable patch, while the orchards that have contributed to one of the main roads used to reach the shōtengai being dubbed “pear avenue” are a less frequent but more imposing presence due to the deep blue, semitransparent anti-insect netting that encloses them. During fall, fruit stands open along the avenue wherever there is room to pull a car over, allowing drivers to pick up a local delicacy while leaving their engines running. The village’s rice fields are also sites of only very intermittent activity. The inconvenience of being woken early by the sound of machinery was something my family and I experienced at most five times a year: once in the spring when the fields are ploughed and planted by specialized tractors designed to complete these tasks in a matter of minutes, two or maybe three times in the following months when herbicides are sprayed from the banks of the paddies with the assistance of back-mounted sprayers, and lastly when the crop is harvested in late summer by combines that cut, thresh and bag the grain ready for delivering to the JA collection centers that handle distribution. A far greater obstruction to our morning slumber were the *kiji*, a species of Japanese pheasant that wander the abandoned rice fields that dot the area and possess a call not unlike a particularly irritating squeaky garden gate but transmitted at several times the volume. Uninterested in the rice, these birds are a far greater nuisance to those tending the vegetable patches that they seem to raid with gleeful abandon unless appropriate defensive measures are taken.

³⁴ Jennifer Robertson has written at length about the concept of *furusato*, a nostalgic and nativist collective image of a village-sited “native place” prevalent within Japan (1988).

From the site of my own vegetable patch at the back of my family’s home on the outskirts of the village’s eastern side, it is almost always possible to spot at night one of former-Taitō Town’s most noteworthy features (Taito Town being itself a precursor to Misaki) thanks to the beam of light it casts across land and sea. Sitting atop a promontory that marks the southern extreme of Kujūkuri Beach, for almost 80 years the Cape Taitō lighthouse has guided ships while also serving as an aspirant tourist attraction. Looking in the direction of Misaki-Chan during daytime (as the anthropomorphized version of the lighthouse is now affectionately known), however, the community hall that once exclusively served Misaki Town prior to Isumi’s creation is the more dominant presence. Both of these structures, the lighthouse and the community hall, as well as others, despite being assigned at their inauguration with the task of serving a particular local population as a symbol of their identity, have now been appropriated with varying degrees of success by the Isumi gestalt.



Image 3. Looking south towards Ōhara from Taitō Point with a model of Misaki-chan in the foreground

The sole municipality in the region that was considered a town prior to 1889 (Kodakawa 1984), Chōja, is the place that actually benefits from having the community hall located in its environs. This might be assumed to be a result of its early acquisition of town status, but this would be an assumption undermined by my own and other nearby villages having been largely indistinguishable in size at the point at which it was constructed. In fact, rather than the presence of a population able to catalyze the development of a regional hub, Choja's early ascendancy to township is principally a result of the 16th century establishment of a shrine devoted to Sugawara no Michizane, a Heian Period poet now deified as a god of learning, at the head of its own shōtengai (Misaki Town 1983:1181). Despite this notoriety, having failed to contribute to a modern growth through pilgrimage or tourism, the shrine now quietly sits on grounds shared by the culture center,³⁵ which is itself predominantly used for hosting classes in photography, *ikebana* ["flower arranging"] and other activities practiced mainly by elderly residents of the surrounding precinct. That said, an exception to this contemplative existence does come several times a year when the community center and the baseball diamond that lies outside it are used for lively festivals that draw residents of the erstwhile Misaki Town to celebrate with one another once again, reinvigorating a conviviality that predates the juncture when the city of Isumi eliminated the literal centrality of the community center's role.

The shōtengai of Chōja was a place I frequently visited. Rather than for the purpose of shopping (my loyalties lying at the feet of those stores closer to my home), I came because it happened to be the location of the offices of an NGO tasked with city boosting that I became particularly associated with. They had set up their premises in a former clothing store that they had fashioned

³⁵ The culture center is a separate, older structure than the community hall. While the former incorporates facilities that allow it to serve multiple purposes, the latter was built during the Bubble Economy and designed around a large and now rarely used auditorium.

after a tourism office and that was large enough to host meetings of various kinds. This type of remaking of space was not a phenomenon enjoying universal success in Chōja, however, as during my time in Isumi the proprietors of several long-standing shops chose to permanently close their doors while professing little prospect of anything coming to replace them. Regardless of the lingering presence of retail and irrespective of the station of the Sotobō Line that runs the length of the city to be found at the end of a side road, like many of the adult population of Isumi who rely on automobiles to get around, I saw Chōja most frequently from behind the wheel of a car. Ironically, this was a view seen most often while carrying out the task of shopping, yet with an alternative target for the exercise of consumerism than the shōtengai of old. For many its role has instead been filled by a competitor that stands at the opposite end of the street to the shrine and that contrasts the reverence of former years with a new iconography.

To locate a site more evenly patronized by Isumi's denizens than that of Chōja shōtengai one follows it to where it meets the city's most significant road, the National Highway 128. Running in parallel with the trainline once integral to those travelling along the Pacific coast of the Bōsō Peninsula, the 128 caters to those wishing to get through Isumi as quickly as possible almost as much as it does those who live there (as many who live inland have little reason to use it regularly). Here, where Chōja's shopping street tees into it, one encounters the largest strip mall the city has to offer, including among its contributions to retail a book and film rental store, a supermarket, a pharmacy, a *hyaku-en* shop (the Japanese equivalent of a dollar store), two family restaurants (casual dining establishments where a wide variety of premade foods are sold at moderate prices), a McDonald's fast-food outlet and ample parking for all. This shopping complex, located on the seaward side of the city and along its busiest road, does draw patrons from throughout the city but it is important to note that it by no means provides any amenity not also accessible elsewhere.

Rather than serving as a center, it is just the one of many examples of retail spaces that hug the highway as it travels south. One could even consider the 128 the closest thing that Isumi has to a citywide shōtengai were it not for its decidedly eastern bias further emphasizing the detachment of those who live up in the hills, far from flatter land of the coast.

Following highway 128 south, a driver will soon enter the territory that was once Ōhara Town. Of the three towns consolidated in 2005, Ōhara was the most densely populated and wealthy. A conglomeration of villages that during the 20th century enriched themselves through the fishing industry, Ōhara's density makes it the closest thing to a center that Isumi currently possesses. Still, in travelling there from Chōja by the most commonly used route,³⁶ you will nevertheless pass farmland that, while having grown distinctly out of place next to more recently built family restaurants, big box retailers and outlet and convenience stores, remains active. After around 20 minutes passing through this hodgepodge scenery you next arrive at the single largest consolidation of residential, business and industrial property in all of Isumi. With the city hall and several other local government buildings concentrated in the hills just behind the former-town, Ōhara's older properties sit in the plains at their foot before land use transitions as one approaches the coast into mixed industry, more recently constructed homes and resort accommodation that, like the nearby port, has experienced decline in line with the country's general economic malaise. The impression of economic depression is not improved when one learns that both the number of fishing vessels leaving port and fish stocks in the region have fallen, though Ōhara still clings to a status of transport hub attained through other means. The train station, in addition to providing a

³⁶ Those in the know will often eschew the 128 in favor of a network of very narrow roads that run parallel to it but lack the traffic lights that, unless one is very lucky, make using the 128 quite a tedious affair. That being said, during my time in Isumi the local police force seemed to be making inroads in tackling the speeding common when using this route, strategically placing bollards that prevent cars passing each other easily.

stop for the rapid service from Chiba City, is the terminus of the Isumi Railway, a third-sector line that since going private in the 1980s has explored various novel means of attracting those from outside of Chiba to partake in non-automotive excursions across the peninsula. The owners have met with some success, offering a mobile bar and restaurant service along with catering to the idiosyncratic interests of railway enthusiasts by allowing passengers to spend the night on the train as it travels back and forth along its 16-mile route, but still struggle to keep their heads above water.³⁷

A further draw for tourists looking for a source of recreation in the town is Ōhara Beach. While its most famous use comes from its incorporation within the festivities of Ōhara's Hadaka ("naked") Matsuri, I knew the neighborhood better for the once-glamorous outdoor pool complex that stood nearby. Built next to a public park and with a reception building and changing facilities possessing an art deco facade, it had proved an unnecessary amenity for visitors and locals. It held significance to me, however, because in 2016 it was turned into a community working space designed to cater to those wishing to relocate to the countryside but continue careers that require little more than a laptop and high-speed internet connection. Those practicing jobs such as these, tied as they are to no one space or place, have become a target for a city government wishing to bolster its population and local tax revenues. Representing one side of a dichotomy that local bureaucrats themselves reinforce, these potential residents are the "modern" contrasted with those associated with agriculture further inland that I had originally set out to study. Their lifestyles and incorporation within Isumi became a major focus of my work and so too did analyzing the part played by agrarian interests in motivating their resettlement.

³⁷ Japan's third sector railways are those that are funded both through private and public finances for the public good. Many operate at a loss but receive support due to the necessity of their service to particular communities.

Driving over the hills that provide Ōhara its backdrop and following the Isumi Railway northwest, one encounters, if the weather and season cooperate, countryside reminiscent of nostalgic animated films and serials designed to invoke a simpler time. Numerous small valleys and plains are laid with rice fields that when first flooded in spring take on the appearance of great, cracked mirrors reflecting the blue sky and green hills that hang over and around them. During March and April, canola blossom spills forth from plants allowed to grow wild along train tracks, especially along a short section also devoted to cherry trees whose *sakura* erupt simultaneously for a few short days as pink clouds hovering above a sea of vibrant yellow. During those perfect moments people from far and wide crowd the area hoping to capture an iconic shot of the old-fashioned cars of the Isumi Railway passing through the scene.

Further upland, once summer has arrived, *asagao* (“morning glories”) creep their way down from the canopy of trees that grow tightly packed on steeper, less workable ground. Shocks of blue and purple that descend to the ground as from the sky, they unite the two. In winter though, once the harvest is over, all returns to muddy browns and greens, except for the slate grey of roads and the Isumi River that winds southward towards its source. Rather than in Isumi City, this source lies in the hills of the neighboring town of Katsūra that once constituted Isumi District’s southern extremity. Following it in that direction one must pass beneath the castle town of Ōtaki in the portion of the district sitting against the eastern face of the mountain range that runs most of the length of the Chiba Peninsula.

The area north and inland of Ōhara did once possess its own castle. On the outskirts of one of the railway’s larger stations, Kuniyoshi, one finds Mangi-jō Ruins Park. With little within its grounds but a small playground and a concrete observation deck constructed with castle-like walls and roof, the site’s location on the ridge on which its authentic predecessor was built does retain

the capacity to impress. I visited it often as a means of getting the “lay of the land” and observing changes in the look of the land I actually worked by acting as an occasional source of free labor. The devotion of energy to the maintenance of reasonable output has been especially concentrated in this area, something that contrasts with the farms I visited in those where woodland once tended by a younger and more active population has become home to wild boar and other wildlife; wildlife increasingly willing to descend from the hills in search of food and venture into plots unprotected by electrified fencing. Instead of rewilding, land around Kuniyoshi use has actually been used for the installation of solar panels. These became a popular source of income following the 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear in which meltdown in which the reputation of nuclear power was destroyed in a matter of hours. The panels have had something of a mixed reception, however, with fans applauding their contribution to clean energy while detractors call them a blot on the natural landscape. My informant, as a returnee to Isumi from Tokyo whose family had no prior background in farming, was one of those tempted back precisely because of this natural landscape and in order to fill the agricultural gaps that have opened. He had not anticipated those gaps being plugged with ugly solar arrays.



Image 4. The Isumi Railway flanked by cherry trees and rice fields

Driving back towards the ocean from Mangi entails passing many small settlements that show signs of having once been home to much larger and more diverse communities. Heading home from here I would pass the empty building that once constituted a nursery, now disused but for two days a month when it houses a small market for local producers of homemade foods and crafts. Schools are not the only buildings that have fallen into disuse in Isumi, with many homes also suffering the same fate. One that became particularly important to me as I worked to build my thesis was that occupied by a group of communally-living permaculturists. Living in a *kominka* [“traditional Japanese home”] in a state of perpetual renovation, their community was one that evolved throughout my time in the field, as did their relationship with the land and people around them. A diverse group, they proved to be one of the most informative as I attempted to weave together both a coherent notion of Isumi and the evolving condition of the people that inhabit it.

With Frayed Edges

Weaving a singular narrative out of patchwork of experiences that can be understood by a reader entirely detached from those experiences presents no small challenge within any literary medium. The norms of crafting in the material world would dictate that one starts at the beginning, laying a foundation by describing your scene and proceeding onwards from there. This practice lends itself well to the approach of a linear story that follows the chronology of events. Anthropologist arrives, anthropologist has experiences, and, altered by those experiences, anthropologist departs. Experiences that stand out most profoundly when delving into the cloudy waters of memory, however, often compel the writer to move them immediately to the fore, confounding the inclination for chronology and instead requiring the frequent passage back and forth through time. Ruth Behar has described the meeting of the two imperatives to obey structure but also complicate it as writing from both the head and from the heart (Behar 1995:67-69). The construction of arguments, essential in academic writing, thus becomes a delicate process in which the need to adhere to a framework runs up against stylistic choices made in creative writing that attempt to capture the complex and often confusing facets of human experience.

In seeking a means of reconciling the two drives to produce text that both obeys a blueprint while leaving room to explore creative expression I found the tradition of patchwork quilting to be a useful metaphor by which to visualize my ambition. Despite being an accretion of disparate parts, patchwork quilts have a long and rich cultural history and are celebrated for their ability to tell stories (Scheper-Hughes 2003). A form of material culture that is often collaborative, quilts develop through the interaction of a myriad of design choices, cultural traditions and personal histories. Like an essay their creation is a generative process, the piecing together of sections of material (or text) allowing for the most significant of designs (or events) to stand in sharp relief

against the structure that binds them. Whereas linearity decries repetition, a patchwork quilt is granted continuity through its presence. What is certain is that whenever a text or a patchwork quilt is concluded, it can never be said to have reached its end. Frayed edges remain that entice the writer back to add yet more to a constantly growing story. In seeking to convey how I went about making a place for myself in Isumi and building a thesis around the experiences I had within it, the patches and threads that I attempt to weave together in the following pages are those crafted from the interactions I had and the observations I made. If Isumi is a place at all, it is one that I will continue to revise and build on as new scales and perspective are discovered.

Table 1. The mergers and dissolutions (*shichōson-gappei*) that have brought the patchwork of Isumi City into being

Heisei Mergers	Post-War Mergers	“Great Meiji Mergers”		Pre-Meiji	
Isumi City (2005)	Ōhara Town (1955)	Tōkai Village (1889)		Wakayama Village	
				Nitta Village	
				Fukahori Village	
				Hiari Village	
		Azuma Village (1889)		Shakayatsu Village	
				Yamada Village	
				Nagashi Village	
				Nagashi Hamlet	
				Samuro Village	
				Takadani Village	
				Nittano Village	
				Shimohara Village	
	Namihana Village (1889)		Hosō Village		
			Oike Village		
			Ozawa Village		
	Fuse Village (1989)		Iwafune Village		
			Iwawada Village		
			Kamibuse (Upper Fuse)		
			Shimobuse (Lower Fuse)		
	Isumi Town (1954)		Kuniyoshi Town (1893)	Kuniyoshi Village (1889)	Jikkoku Village
					Nanamoto Village
					Fukaya Village
					Yamasa Village
Nakagawa Village (1889)			Rakuda Village		
			Imazeki Village		
			Shima Village		
			Mangi Village		
			Kariya Village		
			Kounodai Village		
			Masuda Village		
			Namegawa Village		
		Hikida Village			
		Ōno Village			
Satsumori Village					
Chimachi Village (1889)		Kakiwada Village			
		Shōryūji Village			
		Sakuda Village			
		Yaotome Village			
		Matsumaru Village			
		Ogiwara Village			
		Suguya Village			
		Kamioki Village			
Chōja Town (1989)		Odaka Village			
		Komatai Village			
		Nojitsu Village			
		Chōja Town			
		Ebado Village			
		Mikado Village			
Taitō Town (1954)		Taitō Village (1889)	Izawa Village		
			Higashikodaka Village		
Misaki Town (1961)		Furuzawa Village (1889)	Nakadaki Village		
			Shiigi Village		
			Izumi Village		
		Chōja Town (1989)		Nakahara Village	
				Kuwada Village	
				Iwakuma Village	
				Ichinono Village	
Taitō Town (1954)		Furuzawa Village (1889)	Yagami Village		
			Enokizawa Village		

CHAPTER THREE

Community Building

Introduction

Near the breast of a wooded hill accessed by a steep and narrow road barely wider than a single car stands the observation tower of the ruined Mangi castle. In May the grounds will be a hive of activity, with 300 bright flags designed to resemble *koi* carp lining the entranceway as part of celebrations held to mark Children’s Day, an occasion that also recognizes mothers, fathers and the qualities of familial unity more broadly. On a working day in early spring, however, mine was the only vehicle in the carpark. After following a footpath that passed through thick azalea bushes and that skirted a well-tended sumo wrestling ring, I reached a steel stairway that granted access to the second floor of the observation tower, a modern concrete structure but one designed to evoke the swept roof and white walls of a traditional Japanese *yagura* (“watch tower”). On climbing the stairway, a spectacular view opened up before me. A broad valley stretched towards the western horizon. I could see for miles. The largest inland plain within Isumi, it is filled with active rice fields broken only by scattered copses of pine and cedar, and the forest-clad Isumi river that winds its way among them. To the south I could make out some of the larger structures of Kuniyoshi Town, though the buildings peppering the landscape made it difficult to discern where one settlement ended and another began.



Image 5. Looking west from Mangi-jo's observation tower

Taking refuge from the ambiguity of borders that separate the districts of Isumi by sheltering within solid walls, in this chapter I discuss buildings and their role in sociality. Informed by discourse on Japanese precarity (Allison 2013) and my experiences of initiatives explicitly designed to combat it, the text raises topics that highlight how Isumi, a place on the margins of contemporary urban Japan, presents both a melancholy picture of rural decline, yet one still tinged with hope. Hope, I find, being delivered through the intercedence of community.

The Sonraku Shūkaijō

Snow rarely falls in Isumi. During the two years I spent living in the region there were only two instances I remember where it settled in an amount sufficient to be gathered into even modestly sized snowballs. The first of these occasions coincided with a blizzard hitting Japan so severe that many major highways as far south as Hiroshima were temporarily shut, yet in Isumi the storm's

effect translated into only a slight dusting that was mostly gone by the following evening. That is not to say that the weather could not turn cold. Strong, moist winds off the Pacific Ocean could occasionally combine with frigid inland temperatures from the west and cause unpleasant gales that, while not as strong as the typhoon that arrive mid-summer, are still very unpleasant to be exposed to while outside in the elements or when inside a building with little insulation or heating. It was during one such cold snap that I found myself driving into the hills to the southwest in order to attend an event known as an *inoshishi benkyōkai* (“wild boar study meeting”).

During the course of my fieldwork, I attended many such *benkyōkai*. Arranged by the NPO with which I was affiliated and sponsored by the local government, they entailed gathering the members of a particular area’s *nōson sangyō shūrakukai* (“farmers association”) in a conveniently located community building, usually the *sonraku shūkaijō* (“community hall”), so that a local specialist on the subject of wild boar, Shimura-san, could deliver a lecture. The lecture invariably covered the growing threat posed by wild boar to local agriculture and the various responses the city was making to try to alleviate their effects. Following a fairly dry slideshow the gathered farmers would then be asked to share anecdotes of the crop damage they’d seen or first-hand encounters that they had personally experienced, before hard data on sightings was collected by the NPO’s attendees. Lastly, conversation would turn to how to arrange initiatives and complete applications for funding that could be used to combat the illicit consumption of produce and damage to agricultural property caused by boar and other less imposing pests.³⁸

³⁸ *Kyon*, for example, are an invasive species of muntjac deer that have exploded in number in Chiba since their escape from an amusement park located on the peninsula. Proliferating at an exponential rate, their cute appearance belies the growing threat they pose to agricultural livelihoods. In an effort to control and monetize their presence, Isumi has begun marketing their skins for use in textiles.

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/05/10/national/invasive-mini-deer-breeding-rapidly-destroying-crops-chiba-tries-keep>

The stories told by the gathered farmers during the middle of most of these seminars were usually related by them with a degree of alarm that I at first found surprising. During the event I attended in the winter of 2018 I heard the following from a particularly disgruntled gentleman:

I couldn't understand it. I noticed in one of my fields the rice was growing more upright than usual. Almost vertical. It was only when I climbed down [into the paddy] to investigate that I found the boar had eaten the heads off of the plants. The stalks had no weight to them! Can you believe it? Once or twice, I've caught them in the act but were they bothered? No! (unnamed, personal communication, January 31st, 2018).

Initially, I wrongly assumed that wild boar had wandered the forests of the entire country since time immemorial and so couldn't possibly be an unexpected nuisance. This was until I discovered that, just as with snow, Isumi has had something of a sheltered history in regards to the creature. Shimura-san explained to me during one of our interviews that as the population of the Kantō area had grown during the Tokugawa and Meiji periods ever-more land in the hills and valleys, like those of Isumi, had been settled and cleared. This clearing greatly reduced the cover that provided boars with their principal habitat and invaluable refuge from those wishing to hunt them down for food. As such, the Bōsō peninsula, with its narrow and industrially developed neck that made isolating wildlife populations more likely, had seen its boar numbers reduced to effectively zero by the 1970s (Nagata & Ochiai 2009). This meant that throughout much of Chiba their presence had been driven from both the land and the minds of those who farmed it. What is more, Shimura-san also explained that the creatures troubling farmers now, rather than being descendants of a local stock clawing its way back from the brink of extinction, were actually the progeny of boar from elsewhere that had been crossbred with domestic pigs to provide an authentic-looking but easily tracked animal for the purpose of the sports hunting during the 80s and 90s. This variety,

with a much-reduced instinctual fear of humans and an appetite akin to domestic breeds raised to grow quickly for slaughter, is considered a far greater and human-mediated impediment to pre-existing rural livelihoods than any that existed before it (Yamazaki et al. 2016, Nagata & Ochiai 2009).³⁹

The building used to hold the inoshishi benkyōkai that had brought me out on such a cold winter's night emanated something of a ramshackle charm that quickly faded once I stepped inside and discovered it was barely warmer than the wind-beaten carpark through which I had passed to reach it. Constructed using a wooden frame against which were fixed rickety wooden panels reinforced in places with the same corrugated iron used to cover the roof, it would have struggled to retain heat even if it didn't possess several broken windows. On querying its history, I learned that fifty or sixty years ago its once-thatched roof had primarily been for sheltering local children for whom it served as a schoolhouse and locals conducting meetings, but by the present day it had come to be used exclusively as a function space for a gradually diminishing number of community events.

In upland regions of Japan where schools, local shops, public buildings and other focal points of community activity have typically fallen out of use or been shut down entirely, this *sonraku shūkaijō* seemed to be clinging to state of usability by only its fingernails. What children remained in the village now attended schools concentrated in more densely populated areas, while the mechanization of agriculture, in automating the plowing, planting, watering, and harvesting of crops, had served to render its role as a meeting site for farmers mostly superfluous because of the

³⁹ Isumi's racoons also have a complicated history that implicates recent human behavior in the fomentation of human-animal discord. Rather than it being the native species of *tanuki* or "raccoon dog", it is the invasive *araiguma* or North American raccoon that is a troublemaker prone to home invasion and crop consumption. Like the not-so-wild boar, raccoons numbers grew as a result of human behavior when, following the 1970s release by Japanese television network Fuji TV, of an anime series titled *Araiguma Rasukuru*, there was an explosion in the importation of 'little rascals' by those seeking an unusual household pet. Domestic living with these new arrivals did, however, often prove to not be as idyllic as that which was represented on the show, resulting in many being released into the wild to fend and subsequently thrive for themselves.

degree of collaboration it was intended to facilitate having grown far less necessary. Owing to a machine achieving the planting of a single rice field in a matter of minutes using seedlings factory grown and delivered by the local agricultural cooperative, cultivation is a task now accomplished through short bursts of intense and solitary activity (Smith 1978:246-247, Jussaume 1991). As for other niche uses, the precipitous decline of families in the area has meant that membership of the *shufuren* (“the housewives’ association”) no longer requires much more than a living room to hold gatherings. Regardless of its decline in utility, at least tonight it hosted around sixteen elderly farmers, one new arrival in his early forties, two members of the city’s *ryōshikai* (“hunting society”), a member of city government, two members of the city boosting NPO and an anthropologist. Out of all of the gatherings I had been a party to this was by far the most numerous, indicative both of the more prominent role farming played in the lives of those in the foothills and the return of conditions requiring collaboration.

Inside, the structure consisted of a single large and elevated room laid with tatami mats, around which ran sliding doors that hid the sunken corridor that functioned as kitchen-cum-washroom at one end and storage room and lobby throughout. In the central *washitsu* (“Japanese-style room”) a projector had been set up along with several gas-fired heaters that were run constantly in an effort to keep the cold at bay. The meeting formally began when the projector was switched on and an introduction commenced from the NPO about tonight’s objectives and the various community activities that they, in their role as boosters, were associated. Here, particular emphasis was placed on efforts to bring about migration to the region to contribute to the waning farming industry of which those in attendance were a part. This was listened to dutifully by all those present, in addition to the lecture provided by Shimura-san on the implications of wild boar incursion, an explanation of funding opportunities available to afflicted farmers and how to best secure them made by the

bureaucrat, and a presentation by the two hunters on their society's activities. The point at which things became particularly convivial, however, was when attention ceased to be directed at any one person or persons and shifted instead to an open discussion in which participants were able to share their own opinions, engage in asides independent of the larger group, and freely involve themselves with varying degrees of enthusiasm with the overriding topic of conversation: boar.



Image 6. Enthusiastic farmers contribute to a map used to record wild boar damage and sightings

As the evening progressed it became evident that while wild boar posed a problem through their impact on productivity (and very occasionally threatened personal safety), they were not only harbingers of decline. Owing to electrified fences being the most effective deterrent against them (with hunting and trapping being a time-consuming exercise left largely to the ryōshikai for whom it was not purely a chore), boar forced the community of farmers to come together to act collaboratively. Though wet-rice cultivation dependent on irrigation had once required regular collusion on the part of farmers and their families in managing and maintaining the water supply

(Beardsley et al. 1959, Smith 1978:246-247), now it was an invasion of wildlife that was making it a necessity.

While it is the case that a farmer can surround only their own paddies with a boar-proof fence, and some farmers I met did do just that, consolidating plots together and fencing them in using a single unbroken barrier that envelopes multiple properties is a far more efficient approach. This was also the procedure advocated by the city and for which they were most willing to issue grants. When the question was raised that evening of whose responsibility it would be to maintain shared fences, one brought up by a farmer whose land bordered a large expanse of hillside and essentially shielded some of his neighbors from the onslaught of boar, the suggestion was made that patrols be established that would be conducted according to a rota so that the burden could be born communally. What struck me about the response to this prospective solution was that instead of being perceived as a troublesome but unavoidable task, it was enthusiastically greeted as a means of fostering greater sociality:

- Farmer: We can do it in pairs. The old with the young.

- Head of the local farming association: If more newcomers move here from the city it will be a good way of introducing them to the village and explaining what's what.

- Shimura-san: You'll need to take a *denki yari* ("stun gun") with you to be on the safe side. The village could perhaps keep it and other supplies, bait for the traps, tools for the cages, that kind of thing, here.

- Farmer: I heard you can use *sake* ("rice wine") for bait. Maybe when we're done, we can enjoy some of leftovers! (personal communication, January 31st, 2018)

Appraising the impact of wild boar while driving back to my home that night it was clear that despite it being undeniable that they pose a nuisance, boar may not solely act to the detriment of the inhabitants of the communities they infiltrate. In actual fact, the unity required to tackle their presence provides an opportunity to reinvigorate through new forms of labor the rural version of an essential constituent of Japanese civil society: the neighborhood association.⁴⁰

In the countryside neighborhood associations have largely the same role as their urban counterparts. Broadly speaking, they act as a useful intermediary between the local government and residents on all manner of concerns, administering activities such as waste disposal, the coordination of festivals, and numerous other civic duties for which a hierarchical and age-based structure is well-suited (Bestor 1989, Robertson 1991). Owing to the traditional occupation of the inhabitants of the village I visited being farming, the farmers association essentially filled the role of neighborhood association but in a more explicitly secular fashion. It did exist in parallel with a *sonrakukai* (“village association”) not tied explicitly to agriculture, but many members held analogous positions in both of the two bodies and thus had access to many of the same resources and perpetuated the same practices (the *shūkaijo* included). This was in no small part a consequence of the household participation system in which each family delegates a representative to the *sonrakukai*, a responsibility that typically fell to the male head of the *ie* traditionally most involved in agriculture (though I became familiar with several where the wife did the majority of the work).⁴¹

⁴⁰ Referred to most commonly as *chōnaikai*, *burakukai* and *sonrakukai*, *chōnai* consists of the kanji for “within the town” and thus implies a more urban setting than *buraku* and *sonraku*, both of which can be translated as “village” or “hamlet”.

⁴¹ The *ie* is a patriarchal system by which family structure is managed that traces its roots back to the communal dwelling practices of premodern Japanese farmers. That is not to say that women did not participate in labor, with a robust *obā-san* (“grandmother”) leaping at any manual task being a quintessential image of the Japanese countryside.

In spite of depopulation, an aging society and the alienation of postmodern life taking its toll on the legitimacy of neighborhood associations and the efficacy of their practices in rural Japan, my experiences within the walls of sonraku shūkaijo demonstrated to me that they are an institution that retains great potential to foster community among old members and new. The enthusiasm of their users to handle problems through well-established structures (no pun intended) and welcome urban migrants to a new rural life by way of induction into their practices demonstrates that they and the physical spaces they use retain an important role in bringing about the commonality needed to maintain the economic and social vitality of much maligned locales. It is worth noting, however, that regardless of the saying “where there is a will, there is a way” I would be more hesitant to consider this to inevitably to be the case. As a participant of many inoshishi benkyōkai I encountered only a handful of currently active farmers under the age of fifty. With all the enthusiasm in the world, if families do not arrive that are willing to participate and are properly inducted into the institutions best able to perpetuate social practices, then communities and the buildings that they support will continue to fall into states of ever greater disrepair.

The Kinjō

On moving into a new neighborhood in Japan there is a long-held custom in which the incoming party will visit their *kinjō no hito* (“people of the neighborhood”) and, in a textbook case of reciprocity fomenting social relationships,⁴² combine the presentation of a small gift (a decorative towel or elaborately wrapped box of sweets are common examples) with a personal introduction and request for the goodwill of the established resident. So routinized is the practice that toward the end of my time in Isumi it brought about a socially awkward experience with friends my wife

⁴² By which I am referring to Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift* (2000).

and I had made over the course of the last two years. With the couple and their daughter moving nearby from a neighboring village during the closing months of our stay, we found ourselves assuming the position of the established resident greeted in the formal manner usually reserved for strangers. From our perspective, as well as from that of our friends (something they explained once they had concluded the ‘proper’ pronouncements required), it served a social function rendered mute by the bond between us having already been established. Nevertheless, it remained for them an irresistible custom owing to it being the equivalent of a Durkheimian social fact of rural life, “invested with a coercive power... capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint (Durkheim 1982:21).

It is worth noting that while the manner and language used when carrying out a customary neighborhood introduction has been formalized, the tradition is one that is nonetheless declining in frequency. In fact, though I did not realize it at the time, our attempts to perpetuate the custom and the mixed response we received turned out to be the first of many interactions; interactions that would eventually steer my research from a concern purely for the livelihoods and lifestyles of agriculturalists and towards the topic of community integration and identity more broadly. As a city whose local government was invested in the reestablishment of viable economic and social reproduction, the various successes and failures of small and large-scale efforts to establish holistic identities capable of uniting disparate populations came to occupy my mind, as did the uncertainty of contemporary Japanese rural life and its constitution in opposition to an urbanity being both actively and inadvertently foisted upon it.

Despite having an awareness of the custom’s decline, my wife and I arrived in Isumi prepared to participate wholeheartedly in the customary greeting of one’s neighbors. We assumed that unlike the tenants of our previous urban apartment, our new rural neighbors would anticipate it as

a sign of good faith and commitment to work towards an eventual affirmation of good character. This assumption was, at least initially, undeterred by the knowledge that the particular street on which we had chosen to live had relatively recently been built. We presumed that those who were themselves comparative newcomers would, like us, be invested in establishing new social networks. In preparation I had purchased several *furoshiki* (a traditional cloth used to wrap belongings) sold at a store in our former home of Yokohama),⁴³ while my wife had bought a new dress for our daughter in the hope of capitalizing on the ability of (most) two-year-old children to (usually) warm even the most irascible of hearts. With the three of us decked out in our Sunday best, we chose a quiet weekend afternoon two days after our arrival to make the short journey to the doorsteps of the various houses of our cul-de-sac, clinging as tightly to our gifts as we did to the hope that we would achieve a smooth introduction.

Things got off to a good start. We enjoyed a warm greeting from the Satō family who lived on our immediate left, as well as from the Kimuras and the Watanabes, who respectively lived opposite us and several doors down. These were three households whose children regularly lent the immediate vicinity a convivial air, and whose presence outside was near-constant whenever the weather was good and school not in session. The daughters of the Satō and Kimura families in fact came to adopt our own into their gang of local pre-adolescents, tapping at the back door of our home to call her to play with ever-increasing frequency and enthusiasm throughout our stay. Unfortunately, we were met by no response at all when knocking on several of our other neighbors' doors. Initially putting this down to unfortunate timing, we tried again the following evening but were similarly met by nothing but failure. This outcome persisted on multiple subsequent occasions to the point that, after two weeks spent making intermittent trips back and forth between

⁴³ Anthropologist Joy Hendry has written extensively on the significance of wrapping of all kinds in Japan (1993).

our home and our neighbors' doors at various hours of the day, out of the seven households we originally aimed to call at we retained the presents meant for three.

Determining what to do about our inability to deliver the gifts was something of a conundrum. My wife and I discussed the possibility of approaching those neighbors we had already gotten to know and querying why we were having such difficulty meeting those who seemed forever absent. Despite this potentially being a means of also learning more about the inter-relationships of our neighbors, we were concerned that it might be construed a criticism of antisocial behavior. The last thing we wanted was for any of the more elusive residents to have their first impression of us tainted by a conversation they had in which a community member shared that we had been asking why they were never around. Nevertheless, the longer we held onto the gifts the more ridiculous the premise that they were a symbol of our aspired integration became. It was this time factor that prompted me to engage in the most concentrated period of curtain twitching of my entire field work experience, eventually orchestrating three occasions on which I 'just so happened' to bump into members of two of the three households at the unsociable hours at which they made their twice-daily journeys between house and vehicle.

As I progressed towards completion of the task, I found myself experiencing a mixture of both relief and disappointment. Relief because it meant we were finally ridding ourselves of the items that by lying undelivered near our front door had become a reminder of an unfulfilled custom, and disappointment because our induction into the community, as well as the centrality of community to some of our neighbors' lives, now seemed to clearly be a naïve projection of our own making. This feeling, in addition to the ongoing absence of those same neighbors from events and community practices held over the course of my fieldwork, demonstrated that at least for a portion of Isumi's residents close proximity within a rural setting certainly does not equate with close

neighborly relationships or participation in the established institutions I hoped to make an object of my study.

The difficulty my family had in performing a customary neighborhood introduction has parallels with observations concerning increasing social isolation made by academics within various branches of Japanese studies (Allison 2003, Yamada 1999). The impact of the growth in the number of people living in poverty, for example, is a predicament that has resulted in much-publicized cases where hunger has culminated in individuals enduring lonely deaths from starvation while living just meters from their fellow man (Yuasa 2008). The notoriety of these cases of unnoticed death are numerous enough that the phenomenon has been given its own name, *kodokushi* (“lonely deaths”). The elderly, lacking networks of support previously provided through cohabitation with an extended family, have even turned to crime. This is not solely as a means of accessing food, however, but on occasion the shelter and companionship that a custodial sentence in a Japanese prison provides. There are essentially cases emerging of people sacrificing their freedom in order to escape an unbearable uncertainty about their place in the world and the loneliness that comes with this feeling of profound anomie (Yokoyama 2018; Durkheim 2005). The young have likewise been portrayed as a lost or dangerous generation who, knowing nothing but a post-growth society afflicted by a labor uncertainty that undermines their ability to work, are deprived of long-term occupations that had formerly been the major determinate of identity (Standing 2014).

While there is certainly no single cause, patterns of domesticity that became the norm over the course of the 20th century have certainly played a role in more acutely experienced alienation. The construction of *danchi* (large apartment buildings consisting of many tightly packed individual units) and the growth in popularity of independent living in the post-war era, in particular, have

reduced opportunities for families and individuals to socialize and normalized a withdrawal from neighborly interaction more generally (Keifer 1980:439). The working lives of the urban population have especially influenced community participation, with the Japanese post-War economic miracle hailed as both a remarkable achievement but also a factor contributing to several regrettable side effects being afflicted on salaried employees. With the labor mobilization that contributed to the tremendous economic growth that lasted up until the early 90s guilty of normalizing a detachment (of men especially) from the home for the vast majority of the day, it became a space used by many for little more than resting an exhausted head. This change evidently also reached the countryside, as the professional life of the urban salaryman came to monopolize the conception of the ideal, modern Japanese citizen. In this climate, the reciprocal relationships that foster community nationally ceased to be as grounded in the neighborhood and instead transitioned to the realm of work.

It is worth noting that though a degree of androcentrism present above could be used to question the prevalence of detachment among the general population, the home's transformation into a place used solely for withdrawing socially is adhered to by both men and women. While I did interact regularly with some of my immediate neighbors and those particular neighbors were predominantly female, these interactions often took place while we were mutually inhabiting the role of caregivers to our children. As Japan is a culture in which this task still falls overwhelming on the shoulders of women, reluctance to act as a social being may be applied to both sexes if the obligations of child raising are taken into account. The *hikikomori* condition of total social withdrawal,⁴⁴ for example, while most commonly being applied to men and boys who have shut

⁴⁴ Hikikomori (to “pull inward”) refers to those who have adopted or are afflicted with a condition that results in an extreme rejection of face-to-face interaction. This is a lifestyle usually enabled by a parent or relative, while reported elsewhere, is said to occur with greater frequency in Japan due to the culture's tendency towards coerced collectivism.

themselves up in a single room for years, is one that has also come to be observed in young Japanese women. For women, however, its prevalence has often been overlooked for reasons such as neo-Confucian values excusing isolating behavior as a non-pathological expression of traditionally endorsed ‘feminine’ shyness (Ikegami 2014). Furthermore, other factors that feature in the lives of both genders have impacted domesticity (both in the cities and countryside), such as marriage and childbirth now occurring less often and later in life (Schad-Seifert 2019), generational estrangement, and a desire for independence that would have once been considered self-alienation. The couple living in the property immediately adjacent to ours were both in their 30s, childless and the most consistently elusive of the people who inhabit our cul-de-sac during our time in Isumi. On reflection on this prior to our departure, I realized that aside from the occasional glimpse of one or the other getting into or out of a car, the only time I ever had contact with them was while participating in another and equally dysfunctional enactment of a Japanese exchange relationship. One that also functions as both a source of community unity and mild social monitoring: the passing of the *kairanban* (“circulated bulletin”).

The *kairanban* is a single document regularly passed around neighborhood households that contains news of events, incident reports, garbage collection schedules and other information deemed of potential use or interest to a local community. Attached to a binder designed to make the task of putting it through a letterbox a challenge, the bulletin circulates according to a predetermined route, with each family applying their family seal to the top of the document to indicate receipt before delivering it to the next.⁴⁵ Aside from the obvious function of conveying fairly routine information throughout the neighborhood, it also has the purpose of encouraging

⁴⁵ Personal seals or *inkan* are used throughout East Asia as an alternative to a signature. A single family may have a variety of *inkan* of differing sizes, each deployed according to the significance of the occasion. Those used to ‘sign’ for mail or mark the *kairanban* are usually of the smallest, simplest and cheapest variety.

household interaction and the provision of mutual support through the (ideally) face-to-face meetings that bring about its transmission. The Yoshimotos, the young couple living next door, however, were known to not treat the kairanban as such and could frequently be observed depositing it in the generously-sized letterbox of their neighbor mere moments after it was handed to them. This behavior was a far cry from the romantic predictions of jovial community induction and interconnectedness that my friends in Yokohama had predicted for us when they learned that we were moving “out to the sticks”.

While perhaps an outwardly trivial act, the extent to which this attitude towards the passing of the kairanban was accepted and even taken for granted echoes the response to a lack of community participation in a separate but telling context; one found in Theodore Bestor’s study of *chōkai* (“neighborhood associations”) in 1980s Tokyo (Bestor 1989:26). In Bestor’s Miyamoto-chō, the only party entirely absolved of a need to engage in the activities of the neighborhood were the transient factory employees housed in postmodern company dormitories located on the periphery of an area that otherwise clung to an inclusive internal structure. While the Yoshimotos did maintain the bare minimum of participation, the lack of anticipation of anything more suggests that, in reality, despite living in a hamlet-like corner of a village that outwardly appeared to fulfill the standards of the idealized agrarian communities of popular culture, similar to the residents of Bestor’s dormitories, Japan’s remaining danchi and newer rabbit hutch-like apartment buildings, some members of our kinjō would remain near total strangers. What is more, they appeared entirely comfortable accepting that state.

The Akiya

With seven homes crammed onto land that would not have even provided the rice necessary to feed a single family for a year,⁴⁶ our particular cul-de-sac possessed a compact layout. This was not out of the ordinary, however, as if one looked east, south or west from a rear window of our home and across paddy fields that it backs onto, the horizon was intermittently broken by similar pockets of densely-packed and recently constructed homes. A feature of the skyline that stood out and contrasted with those in equal measure, however, were several large buildings partially obscured by dense vegetation. It became apparent during explorations my family and I made of the surrounding area that these dilapidated structures had once been homes, yet had since been abandoned to nature, wildlife and the elements. The most striking was a large property built next to one of the rarely visited Shinto shrines that are scattered throughout the countryside. With stained walls, a steep, copper-green roof dusted with leaves and elegantly designed but cracked French windows, the house was partially visible from elevated ground at a distance or by walking to the property boundary and peering through the occasional break in the dense bamboo thicket that had enveloped it. The appearance of erstwhile gentility and period style was made all the more palpable by what must have formerly been a chic steel bicycle that now lay rusting next to the main doorway in a tangle of vines, tempting us to ponder if an unanticipated event had led the owners to leave abruptly. Any sentimental reading of the scene, however, was mocked by the plastic bags of trash that hung like fetid baubles from the bulging metal fence that strained to hold the bamboo back from the road. With structures in a similar condition being notorious throughout rural Japan, I was immediately aware that this and a number of other properties scattered

⁴⁶ During the Tokugawa period a koku equated with the amount of rice consumed by one person in one year, equaling approximately five bushels.

throughout Isumi were *akiya*, the “vacant homes” that have come to be associated with troubling societal issues afflicting all of Japan.

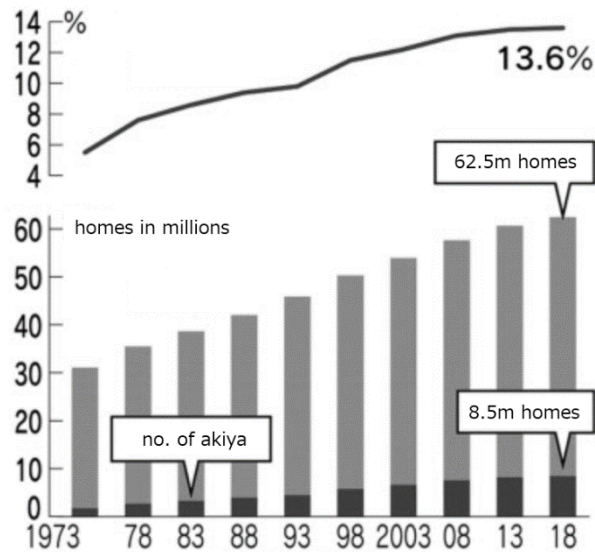


Table 2. *Akiya as a proportion of Japanese Homes*

Though outwardly representative of local population decline, the large *akiya* sited on generous plots of land lying in the immediate vicinity of tightly packed and spartan homes echo the rural/urban contradictions found in Isumi’s patchwork quality but on a smaller scale. Conveying a state of physical abandonment, their presence appeared anomalous when considering how our own home and many like it were recently put up on land previously set aside for agriculture. Though one might assume that Japan’s aging society, compounded by outward urban migration, would bring about a depressed demand for the construction of rural homes, field work in Isumi and my own actions in choosing to rent our house over others demonstrated that the opposite could be the case. Yet with national-scale depopulation occurring, it is a mathematical certainty that growth in one settlement must be balanced by proportionally greater contraction in others; and though this is usually taken to imply a city’s expansion at the expense of the surrounding countryside, the area

I inhabited in Isumi demonstrated that this phenomenon could occur within the space of only a few hundred yards.

Despite figures recording akiya constituting around 18 percent of the housing stock in the late-2010s (Sobel 2015), inhibitions that stymie their occupation have resulted in a situation where the very process by which rural areas might be revitalized, migration, has a muted impact in combating a region's perception as a victim of decline. The location of new, mini housing developments such as my own on the repurposed perimeters of existing agrarian settlements creates a jumbled topography. Under these conditions it is perhaps no surprise that the formation of a community identity is hampered, as the means by which it occurs is burdened by the weight of the 'vestigial' akiya. Under these circumstances, rather than saving communities 'on the edge', migration has created pockets of dysfunctional community that lie literally on the edge of settlements prevented from achieving holistic identities that transcend their territory. Considering the impediment to integration akiya present, the simple question of why farmland is repurposed a stone's throw from residential land abandoned to nature begs an answer. That answer, however, is complex and entwined with factors pertaining to Japan's, economy, bureaucracy, and cultural proclivities that have become especially acute in predominantly rural regions like that in which Isumi lies. Despite possessing multiple and often complex origins, the history of akiya, such as that which I found so close to my own home, provides a useful if melancholic means of unpacking the answers to the question of how it is that space is so differentially remade.

Through conversations had with the matriarch of the Satō household, a robust woman in her 60s who still worked as a seasonal employee of the local pear orchards, the home that lay uninhabited so close to our own had most recently been that of an elderly couple named the Yoshiokas. With the husband having inherited the land from his father and he and his wife having raised a family

in Isumi, they had remained in the house despite their adult daughter moving into her own property some distance away and their son departing for Tokyo decades earlier to establish his life there. Due to its size, the property had steadily grown more difficult for the aging pair to manage, with, for example, the rapid-growing bamboo that now encircles it quickly spreading when regularly cutting it back had become more than they could handle alone. The property's fate to languish as an akiya had been sealed when the husband fell ill in his 80s and required long-term hospitalization (an illness from which he never recovered), in response to which his wife moved in with the daughter without finding alternative occupants for the house. As the daughter had no desire to take on the costly chores necessary to maintain the property in addition to becoming the primary caregiver to her mother, it went untended and eventually reached a state where the money necessary to bring it to a condition where it might be rented was too great for the rent received to have any hope of providing a return.

One might ask, why was the house and land not sold as soon as it became clear it could not be maintained in good condition? When I sought the Satō family's opinion on the matter the response was that every now and then they'd hear by word of mouth that somebody had come to view the property but that these viewings never came to anything. With homes in Japan long having been built in anticipation of earthquakes and degradation caused by the seasonally humid environment, they are considered half way through their lifespan once they have exceeded 15 years of age. The Yoshioka house, while possessing an elegance concealed behind a layer of neglect, would have long ago passed that point of decline and moved into a state of perceived obsolescence. Were somebody to be so charmed by the house that they were willing to overlook its age, an actual sale would still be encumbered by the bureaucratic and financial hurdles of conducting the inspections necessary to guarantee the building met regulations designed to ensure the safety of its new

inhabitants. Building foundations would need to be inspected for subsistence, the wooden frame examined for rot or termite damage and the materials that make up the internal and external walls assessed to ensure sufficient fire retardance. Similar regulations, while less stringent than in the case of a sale, would also need to be followed if rental had been considered and would be a requirement combined with a need to bring the house up to a condition in which it could be lived in. Lastly, and to introduce a more cultural dimension, the Yoshioka *ie*, by which I mean the multi-generational household, had worked the land on which the house was built since the mid-1800s and owned it outright since the conclusion of the Second World War. To sell it, even in spite of their late-middle-aged children having no wish to take up residence, would have meant taking personal responsibility for surrendering property of which they would be considered only the current custodian.⁴⁷ The great irony is that a reluctance to part with assets held in trust for future generations can result in derelict *akiya* that provide their owners with no income and yet still accrue taxes, taxes that force whoever eventually inherits the property to forfeit their rights to the estate due to an inability or possibly an unwillingness to take on the debt now owed.

Another frequent barrier to the sale of *akiya* that was thankfully not relevant in the Yoshiokas case concerns a stigma around death that becomes especially evident when interacting with Japan's real-estate businesses. If a person dies within a property, something that is statistically more common in the countryside where the average age is significantly higher than that of the nation as a whole (MIFCJ 2020:21), it is considered to impart a polluting effect on the building that has a very real chance of impeding its sale. Despite personally being dismissive of the idea that death can leave an intangible air of pollution on a home, the reality of a quantifiably negative

⁴⁷ Within the *ie* system even the contemporary head of household is considered only a custodian of property that must be retained in order to hand it on to subsequent generations.

impact was made evident to me when I signed the lease on my own house. A provision in the contract stipulated that if anyone were to die in the building during the period in which we were leasing it, whatever the circumstances, either I or my guarantor (contracts in Japan often require a second person commit to pay on behalf of the first in the event that they fail to do so) would be responsible for paying a sizeable penalty to the landlord. This anticipation of an aversion to purchasing or renting property in which a death has occurred is actually enshrined in Japan's real estate laws, with an article obliging agents to disclose any information about a property that could affect a buyer's decision. A death, especially a violent or mysterious one, would figure particularly high on the list of those considered to be of relevance.

The wife, daughter and son of the Yoshioka family benefit from the fact that their father was hospitalized long before he passed away and so restoring the property to a clean state is a physical rather than a metaphysical task. If they do succeed in selling or instead develop the land, its proximity to the comparably popular eastern side of Isumi, a short drive from the beaches frequented by surfers year-round, is another advantage. Japan's approach to rural development makes special mention of the role played by the qualities that define each particular locale in its drive to achieve sustainability. In 2002 the Ministry of the Environment emphasized this in a policy document that read: "Each region has unique resource that include history, culture and human resources...[and] putting regional resources to efficient use is ongoing efforts undertaken not just by local administrators, but residents, businesses, and civic groups" (MOE 2002:3). This notion of relying on both an area's physical and cultural attributes and the ability of those who reside within them to actively participate in their promotion was also a major objective of the municipal merger that brought Isumi into being. In essence, newly consolidated regions were expected to flourish while relying more heavily on themselves and monetizing the commons in order to fill the 'blank

spots' that lay within them. Inland, where sparsely inhabited settlements are occupied by residents mostly beyond the age of 65 throughout the country (Ono 2005), there is far greater difficulty in gathering the civilian participation necessary to making this policy a success. Many of the akiya in communities in the hills where forests encroach, fields lie fallow and buildings crumble have a far more pessimistic outlook than that of the Yoshioka's when it comes to their potential to attract new owners or tenants from the only viable source: the city. It was precisely this potential for isolation and other troubles related more specifically to inhabiting older properties (such as the lack of adequate heating during cold winter months) that gave pause to my wife and I when looking at houses, despite the tempting prospect of more space and greater natural beauty, all for a much lower rent.

In relation to agricultural continuity in land ownership, that which is attached to properties located inland actually compounds the difficulty in seeing akiya reoccupied. Owing to legislation requiring that new owners engage in full-time farming in order to qualify for ownership, potential buyers need to get approval from a local agricultural committee to even make the purchase. Were one to circumvent this requirement by renting the attached farmland at a pittance to active farmers, as some of my informants had arranged to do, the advanced age of those still in the industry makes this potentially only a very short-term solution. And while bureaucratic flexibility around such stipulations was reported to me, a lack of certainty can be enough to deter people from pursuing a purchase. Incidentally, the misapplication of 'flexibility' was one of the few times I heard open and animated criticism of the local administration, with accusations of illicit exceptions being thrown at instances where fields, like that which my home had been built in, were redesignated residential and developed on while akiya stood close by. These factors all collude to render akiya problematic even in spite of national projects that seek to tackle the problem. "Akiya banks," with

the express purpose of revitalizing communities of falling population by advertising cheap examples, have received attention in the popular press but with regulations and the reality of alienation from centralized services being difficult to look over they are far less successful in ensuring the reoccupation of abandoned and derelict properties than one might think.

The central government of Japan has a problematic history when it comes to imposing self-sufficiency on rural communities. This was made indelibly clear following the 3/11 earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima Dai-Ichi nuclear disaster when, with little recourse to using appropriate personal protective equipment, elderly residents of rural communities afflicted by radiation volunteered themselves for the task of decontamination (Sternsdorff-Cisterna 2019:107; Belson 2011). While their efforts were certainly selfless and heroic, the committee is still out on whether the sacrifice they made for the younger generations of Japan will be reciprocated by a long-term reinvigoration of depopulated and infrastructurally abandoned areas of the country. The difficulty in solving the issue of akiya is similarly indicative of whether urban-rural migrants are willing and able to take on the burden of “filling the gaps” rather than merely recreating urban density and culture in alternative, once-agrarian spaces.

Conclusion

Like that of “culture” (Geertz 1973), the concept of “community” has a mutability to its usage. Its carries with it many associations but landing on a single shared definition, even among anthropologists for whom it is an eminent topic of study, is far from guaranteed. The development of increasingly global structures has meant that units of people or “communities” are forever being incorporated into larger structures and so become more difficult to discern. But both inside the buildings of Isumi and from without, the pursuit of “community” was constantly conjured in my mind as an integral ambition of their users. This is the reason why I chose to title this chapter

“Community Building,” simultaneously describing both the structures themselves, for they are managed and maintained by the community, but also the singular function that they serve: the gestation of “community”. Yet in discussing the topic with my informants, I grew to question whether we were always speaking in the same terms—whether the definition and usage to which I ascribed “community” was necessarily one shared between us. In light of this, studying buildings and their uses (or lack thereof) became a means of us talking both about community and *through* community.

When I first brought up the notion of community with my informants, I began by using the word “*shakai*”, which can also translate as “society,” to enquire about their thoughts on the condition of the areas in which they lived and what community actually meant to them. “Are the akiya of this village damaging your sense of rural community?” “*Kono mura no akiya wa inaka no shakai ni donna inshō wo ataerun desu ka?*” I would ask, but I found that this conveyed too broad a meaning and seemed inappropriate when combined with settlements on the scale of village or town. Responses would be abstracted beyond the scope of the individuals with which I was speaking and become about the state of Japan as a nation. Yes, I could get away with “*chiiki shakai*” (“regional society/community”) but any attempt at “*kono mura no shakai*” (“this village’s society/community”) or “*anata no shakai*” (“your community”) would raise eyebrows if applied to the immediate vicinity. While my choice of “shakai” where I meant community might have satisfied Talcott Parsons, for whom it characterized the social cohesion of a society held together by a shared morality (Parsons 2007), in Isumi I found the implications of the term located “shakai” in the post-industrial period that is responsible for the loss of the sense of close-knit community I wished to study.

In pursuit of community at a smaller scale, I needed a word that implied a degree of self-sufficiency embedded in a historical continuity and a collective consciousness of distinctiveness. Here the sonrakukai's kaijo proved useful, for it was a multifunctional building that had played a role in the lives of several of the people I met from their childhoods onwards. With that in mind I played with using the term *aidentiti* ("identity"), a word borrowed directly from the English language and rendered in Japanese with much of the same meaning. Where it fell down, however, was that its individualistic connotations are out of sorts with the communality that is relied upon in definitions of the self in all things Japanese.⁴⁸ I found the word too tied to a perceived Western individualism that could not easily be distributed among, say, farmers heralding from a single village. What is more, for those acculturated by the hierarchical structures of Japanese society, to assert ones *aidentiti* as a singularity becomes a potential weakness (Doi 1977; Nakane 1970). Eventually, after some agonizing over whether it represented a failure on my part to integrate myself enough to be able to adopt an emic perspective, I simply settled on the use of *comyuniti* ("community"), yet another borrowed word and one that comes with some significant baggage.

Within Japan the word *comyuniti* bears a strong similarity to what elsewhere might be referred to as ethnicity. The country has Brazilian and Korean 'communities,' by which I mean that there are entirely integrated groups of people who owing to the conditions of their birth (and not their culture) are considered alter by the supposedly homogenous Japanese population at large.⁴⁹ In these instances, the word becomes relational, implying some similarity but also stark difference. Considering it in this manner the words of Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson ring true:

⁴⁸ Here I am again referring to the concepts of *uchi* and *soto*, the distinction between in-groups and out-groups that makes up a fundamental part of Japanese social custom and linguistic behavior.

⁴⁹ To explain my use of "entirely integrated" I shall rely on an example: I believe a member of the Korean community in Japan has more in common with their non-Korean community member peers than those non-Korean peers may do with a non-peer group member of the imagined community of ethnically and culturally homogenous Japanese.

'Community' is never simply the recognition of cultural similarity or social contiguity but a categorical identity that is premised on various forms of exclusion and construction of otherness (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997:13).

Rather than bolstering essentialisms or conjuring isolates by seeking to find 'communities' in Isumi, however, I hope, like the buildings themselves, to demonstrate the cosmopolitan quality of even those rural spaces that might be assumed to be the last bastion of 'old Japan.' Whether considered in terms of society, identity or ethnicity, community is something to be possessed and that it is possible, like Mangi Castle, to defend. It is the defense of Isumi's communities that I shall now turn to. Something that those within the city are very actively engaged in.

CHAPTER FOUR

Communities Reclaimed

Introduction

I pulled up outside Taka-san's house at about 8am on a bright, warm morning in early summer. A small building of an unusual tent-like design in a modest state of disrepair and behind a thicket of unkempt bushes, its size was such that it could only possibly contain the bare essentials of a bed, bath and kitchen. To the left stood a large shed from which a stout chimney protruded, a telltale sign of the cottage industry that dwarfed the house in importance to their owner, while on the right and to the rear there was a generous vegetable garden in which a variety of crops were growing in beds arranged over all of the available space. While appearing out of place on the edge of a village in which family homes are plentiful, the irregular style of the property was consistent with the expectations I had formed after first meeting Taka-san a week previously. A professional potter in his mid-sixties that sported a long silver ponytail and a bohemian charm, he diverged from "the norm" and was happy for both his physical appearance and that of his home to demonstrate it. Curious to learn more about him and exactly what had brought him to Isumi during the 1990s, I had leapt on his invitation to visit for an interview when we were introduced at an occasion put on to celebrate the launch of a local sake. This was despite realizing the role that the generous samples of the newly-available product may have had in encouraging his hospitality.

Knowing better than to call him the morning after our first meeting, it wasn't until late the following day that I rang to suggest we get together. In an equally laid back though less loquacious manner than he had used the previous evening, Taka-san suggested that rather than conducting a formal interview we instead travel together to participate in an event held by a community

organization and NGO of which he was a member, the *Takezumi Kenkyūkai* (“Bamboo Charcoal Society”). He explained that they would soon be gathering to clear bamboo from property owned by an elderly couple that lived inland, after which the group would burn it down to produce the resource that gave the society its name and that provided a reasonable income when sold to specialty chefs or gardeners looking for a rich, organic fertilizer.⁵⁰ It was this invitation that had led me to navigate the warren of barely drivable lanes that hug the northern side of the Isumi river near where it reaches the ocean, park up outside his secluded property and tentatively call “*Shitsureishimasu~*” (“Excuse me”) from just outside his front door.

Following several more calls of the same delivered at a louder volume, Taka-san emerged from the main building scratching his chin and expressing some shock at my presence. “You’re early,” he mused...despite my arrival falling at exactly the predetermined time. Still needing to gather his things, he suggested I wait in my car for 20 to 30 minutes. Having never been down this particular road before but knowing it ran parallel with the river, I took this as an opportunity to go in search of a view of the surrounding area by picking my way over a patch of untended scrub that lay opposite the property and clambering up the river’s concrete-reinforced bank. In this latter task I was successful, though the pleasantness of the view was colored by a familiar characteristic that has long troubled me when confronted by Japan’s “natural” landscapes.

Spending any significant amount of time in Japan will usually make one aware of the country’s extensive attention to “river stabilization.” Relying on infrastructural development projects as a convenient means of recording consistent expenditure and thus assuring continued receipt of comparable government support, prefectures throughout the nation have for decades been active

⁵⁰ Charcoal is a beneficial additive to soils as it contains many of the nutrients found in the organic matter from which it is made while also increasing, through its porosity, the ability of the soil to hold onto those nutrients (Steiner 2009).

in the systematic lining of their waterways in concrete (Waley 2005). As a result, in a country otherwise renowned for its natural beauty, rivers have become a conspicuous victim of an equally well-known inclination towards maintaining order. Just as it is said that “the nail that sticks out shall be hammered down,” so too will the river that bursts its banks be hemmed in.⁵¹ Owing to the country’s rainy season making a degree of flooding a near certainty in most cases, it is concrete that has been allowed to flow freely while rivers have not.

In urban spaces the outcome of this developmentalist streak is an abundance of stark, grey canals that are often capped by elevated expressways, whereas in the countryside a substantial watercourse not enclosed within a retaining wall is a rare sight unless one delves deep into the mountains. And while it might be argued that Japan’s vulnerability to dam-busting earthquakes and seawall-breaching tsunami provides legitimacy for the practice, with the various instances of inundation during the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake tsunami and nuclear incident demonstrating the devastation that can be wrought by water, critics have been especially vocal in questioning whether river entrapment is justified when the outcome is the mitigation of only potential harm at the cost of inevitable environmental degradation (Waley 2005:205). After all, a deep, gutter-like river that transmits its charge quickly to the ocean leaves little time for it to contribute to the many ecosystems through which it passes.

From where I stood atop a two-meter-high baffle, looking to the east I could see in the distance the white hulls of the small motorboats that clustered around the local marina, as well as the Kōtō bridge, the last crossing before the Isumi river flows into the Pacific. If a river’s mouth can generally be assumed to imply a broad opening that contrasts with the enclosed passage that

⁵¹ The phrase is used to refer to the extent Japan is considered a homogenous nation that meets difference with the application of social pressure to conform.

preceded it, that of the Isumi river contradicts this commonsensical definition. In its case, two thick seawalls of approximately 60 meters in length penetrate the ocean spray while reigning in the river's breadth. These, in combination with a leveed tidal pond that runs parallel with the coast for several kilometers, were actually lauded historically for allowing farmers to establish rice paddies where previously they would have been vulnerable to saltwater.⁵² But the taming of nature is an activity that is never complete and one that requires constant vigilance.

Turning back to peer across the river I noticed the extent to which its concrete embankments have deteriorated. Along the water's edge vegetation sprang from behind the retaining walls and crept out of cracks in its face, to then tumble down into the water below. I was not, in fact, standing on a stable concrete outcrop but rather a tangled mat of long grass and vines that on closer inspection concealed pockmarked aggregate, decomposing leaves and the mooring line of a rusting skiff partially submerged in the waters that ran below me. The principal reason for degradation such as this going unremedied lies in the "instability" of the political policies that first embarked on the project of indiscriminate "river stabilization." Civil engineering programs conducted in rural areas that had become habitual during the post-War economic boom, projects that had even continued for a time after the country began its fall into recession in the early 1990s, had now simply ceased to be tenable in a society in which the population and their political power to promote partisan interests grow more concentrated in the urban core. Though it is the case that the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have traditionally leaned on rural constituents in maintaining an almost unbroken position of power for decades (Mulgan 2000:179), and thus has been keen to meet their expectations, during the 2000s its willingness to cater to this constituency

⁵² During attendance at the annual Children's Day festivities, I witnessed a puppet show that recounted the efforts of a historical Isumi farmer/merchant who had made it his life's mission to construct a sluice gate capable of defending against saltwater ingress during spring tides.

declined in line with both the number of its members and their contribution to the national economy. When national reforms under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi introduced the policy of *chihō bunken* (“regional decentralization”) and moved responsibility for financing rural development more squarely onto the shoulders of municipal governments, these governments responded by paring down their spending on maintenance of the infrastructure of the more sparsely populated areas (Pickering et al. 2020).

Rather than devoting attention to rivers running through underpopulated towns and villages, the much-reduced rural construction industry of Isumi was redirected by local government towards alternative development projects seen as having a greater priority. As a result, the job of tackling the questionable state of river baffles has been put on hold and subsidies instead directed towards wall destruction rather than re/construction. At that very moment on the opposite side of the river in the vicinity of Chōjamachi, *azemichi*, the narrow ridges of earth that separate rice fields and contribute to the pleasant patchwork quality of the plains and terraced hillsides of Japan were being removed and fields consolidated in order to facilitate the commencement of “factory” farming.⁵³ And while these changes were applauded as a long-overdue modernization of an industry held back by a reluctance to adopt economies of scale by Matsuda-san, a key informant of mine and major player in local agriculture, my own more critical reading noted that the choice of where projects were being carried out actually replicated a binary that favors urban spaces, only on a smaller scale. With city funds being spent on Chōjamachi and the surrounding area, the one settlement that during the 19th century was considered a town, attempts at reestablishing economic vitality in an otherwise struggling farming sector remain biased towards those that lie closest to

⁵³ Usually applied to an intensive approach the animal husbandry that entails maximizing production through keeping livestock in factory-like conditions and thus reducing costs, I apply it here to the increase in plot sizes (especially of rice fields) that allows for their planting and harvesting through the use of heavy machinery.

the most densely populated spaces. And this is despite the goal being a “reorientation” of farming in a manner designed to lessen the necessity of human involvement.⁵⁴ To return to the activities of the Takezumi Kenkyūkai, in contrast to those in the local government responsible for distributing subsidies for regeneration and development projects, Taka-san and its other members are keen to cater to families and communities located in the foothills equally pursuant of revitalization but in a more isolated and precarious state.



Image 7. Cherry Blossom in full bloom along a concrete lined 'river'

A short while after I had ceased pondering the state of Isumi's rivers and scrambled back down the bank, I joined Taka-san in his car for the drive to the Takezumi Kenkyūkai's meeting point.

⁵⁴ One project sponsored by the local government entailed carrying out weeding through the use of solar-powered robots that patrol the neatly planted rows of plants and destroy weeds as they appear.

As we headed westward the two of us discussed how the decline in the rural population has allowed infrastructure and spaces formerly tended by human custodians to essentially be reclaimed by nature.

They are hard workers, farmers. That's part of the problem. Kids all have relatives or see people around that did it and know how hard the life can be. You can't blame them for not wanting to do that to themselves. It's tough.⁵⁵ But you need a lot of people to manage land here. The *yatsuda* ("minimally managed upland rice fields") have already vanished and a lot of the other land is disappearing now too. Weeds quickly overruns you if you don't fight back.

The return of vegetation to a landscape incrementally brought under human control over the course of generations was precisely the phenomenon that had motivated the Takezumi Kenkyūkai's formation. Riverbanks are certainly not the only neglected spaces where an ingress of pioneer species is occurring due to the replacement of modernization projects by a survivalist inclination that favors some sites over others. In fact, they are not even the only waterways implicated in this phenomenon. This was a point made emphatically clear when Taka-san and I arrived at our destination on that warm summer morning and during the course of backing the car up into a parking space disappeared over the edge of a crumbling concrete irrigation channel obscured by an accumulation of leaves, branches and other detritus. As I would learn through ongoing participation in the forestry-like activities of Taka-san and his fellows, the presence of this particularly pitfall, while taking us both by surprise in that instant, is a predictable symptom

⁵⁵ At this point Taka-san made an oblique reference to the bent backs that afflict a large number of elderly Japanese who worked in farming prior to mechanization. Hand planting rice in flooded fields requires the legs to remain straight while the back is bent at the waist to keep the upper body parallel with the ground. This can result in a distinctive type of hunched back in some individuals. It is worth noting, however, that one reason this condition is infamous is the remarkably long lifespans of many Japanese farmers (and the population more broadly) and how active they remain in their later years. The "troubles" of the profession are visible precisely because the lifestyle is one that has taught practitioners conspicuous self-reliance and enabled them to live on into old age.

of an array of afflictions that result from the chronic problem of land abandonment. Once you cease paying attention to areas of decline the hazards that await you can quickly multiply.

Rewilding and its Implications

In recent academic literature on the topic, “rewilding” has been celebrated as a process by which natural ecosystems are able to restore themselves following a reduction in human influence (Gillson et al. 2011). Inflected with a strong advocacy for the preservation and encouragement of biodiversity, this discourse provides valuable insight into contemporary rural transformation. There is a danger, however, that enthusiasm for ecological rehabilitation diminishes attention paid to the experiences of those for whom the resumption of “natural” processes may have negative consequences; consequences with the capacity to overwhelm their ability to inhabit these newly rewilded environments. I found the increasingly depopulated hinterlands of Japan to be a locale in which this eventuality is coming to pass.

In Isumi and elsewhere in Japan, the inland mountainous areas are now disproportionately inhabited by the elderly and infirm as a result of both the declining birthrate and long-standing urban migration (Allison 2018). This has meant that those that remain in these parts of the country, a population that due to their advanced age often lack the experience, resources and political agency necessary to see to it that returning species are held at bay, have grown gradually more “invisible” due to a city-centric national consciousness (Chiavacci & Hommerich 2017:201-214). Upland communities that may once have been home to large numbers of people are subject to social decline not due to but in consort with a phenomenon of rewilding and, as a result, are handicapped in their ability to determine their ongoing lived realities and shape the spaces in which they reside. The plot next to which Taka-san and I eventually parked, once we had received

assistance in pulling the car from where it teetered on the edge of a rice paddy, was owned by one such couple.

The Psychology of Abandonment

After Taka-san and I had brushed ourselves down I was introduced by Rinka-san, one of the Takezumi Kenkyūkai's leaders, to the Yamamuras. In their 70s, the Yamamuras had lived in Isumi all their lives and raised two children in their current, timber and tile-built home. Both of these children had long since left, however, with a son moving to Tokyo and a daughter now living overseas. They themselves had chosen to stay put rather than attempt to sell up and follow their children elsewhere, explaining their reluctance to do so as a result of their strong affection for the area and, despite doing no more than kitchen gardening since retirement, their participation in and responsibilities to the community that remained.⁵⁶ Jovial people and obviously grateful that we were visiting for the purpose of clearing a large section of their land that had become almost impenetrable due to bamboo, on my second visit they nevertheless shared with me a somber opinion of the level of attention some of the more isolated communities of Isumi receive:

We are all one city now but the problems we face are very different. It's more convenient for people on the coast, so they go there There's nothing here so we are left behind. Transport is better there. The schools are there. We're all struggling in the countryside but it's getting much harder for us to live [inland] in *our* homes (Yamamura-san, 2017).

The sentiment the Yamamura's expressed was that the "togetherness" the city boosters of Isumi sought to promote was all well and good, but inland things continued to only get harder post-

⁵⁶ They made a point of noting that they were not the oldest members of the community and therefore had a responsibility to see to it that their seniors not be abandoned.

consolidation, not better. Among elderly people separated from family and part of a dwindling local population, feelings of abandonment are felt increasingly strongly despite the best efforts of a socially-engaged few. And while the Yamamuras and some others in their hamlet have sought to make the best of the situation and endure the decline in rural vitality, yet more families choose to escape it by relocating. In doing so they unintentionally contribute to a worsening of conditions. A catch-22 has thus emerged in many rural areas where a lack of people to feed services like businesses and schools has meant their closure, which then renders these places far less attractive to newcomers. When Isumi's municipal authorities chose to merge school districts and close several of those lying furthest from the majority of their student body, for example, what remained further up the valley from the Yamamuras' was a *haikō* ("abandoned school"), a constant and ghostly reminder of the community's child-depleted if not 'barren' state.

Impassioned expressions of concern regarding the declining youth population of Isumi regularly came up during my time in the field. It was the topic that prompted the only occasion where I witnessed a public display of unrestrained anger and frustration. This came during a seminar held at the city hall being run to source local opinions on potential methods of rejuvenating Ōhara high-street. The event had been organized by a university professor who had made Isumi a subject of her research. At its conclusion, a local bureaucrat attending on behalf of the city administration rose and gave a speech thanking all participants for their energy and ingenuity in seeking to play a role in solving Isumi's (unspecified) issues. Where the outburst came was ten minutes later during a final discussion period when a local elderly man in his late-60s or 70s addressed a question to the bureaucrat who had unfortunately by that point ceased giving proceedings his undivided attention. What had initially been asked was what the city was doing to improve job prospects for the young, a seemingly selfless question coming from a man in the

twilight of his years, but what followed was a long tirade in which the younger gentleman was berated for his selective attention and the superficiality of the city's efforts to distribute infrastructure in a manner that would prevent youths leaving the region and its families being divided. The selectivity of attention in this case was meant to both imply the bureaucrat's rudeness in that moment but also a problem the older man had with the whole premise of the seminar and political priorities in general. The high-street of the comparatively densely occupied Ōhara might be rejuvenated, but what about everywhere else?

Near the coast, where I lived, every school day morning I could observe from my living room window a procession of figures traipsing down the roads that ran behind our house heading to either the nursery, middle school or junior high sited nearby. Eventually my wife and I also joined this procession when my daughter entered the local kindergarten. Not only was this morning ritual a demonstration of the intergenerational continuity of a community fortunate to lie near the concentration of infrastructure running along Isumi's coastline, but also a regular source of socialization. Neighborhood housewives and grandmothers would gather at the roadside to watch over the children heading to school, taking it as an opportunity to exchange gossip and discuss recent events. Referred to as *itobata kaigi* ("well-side meetings"), these 'conferences' provide an invaluable means of information sharing and codify the set of practices that constitute anticipated community participation.⁵⁷ The role of social activities and the importance invested in participating in them is such that selfhood in Japan has been described as "consciously socio-centric" and opposed to the West's "ego-centric" approach (Kirmayer 2002:306). And despite a lack of school age children precluding one from participation in some activities (as discussed in

⁵⁷ This practice was considered obligatory for families with school-age children and while I witnessed fathers and grandfathers escorting their family members to school, other than myself I was not a party to any men participating in discussions that I would consider qualified for the *itobata kaigi* label.

Chapter 3), they still play a major role in defining the networks considered integral to a well-functioning community. Thus, where they are absent, for some they are sorely missed.

The absence of other often taken for granted conveniences that make up a reasonably self-sufficient community had also had a demoralizing effect on the Yamamuras. Businesses that had once been occupied nearby had closed down and fallen into disrepair over the years, rendering the task of shopping for everyday necessities an increasingly irksome chore. This closure of small businesses was not even isolated to their own inland area far from the major coastal highway. The high street of Chōjamachi, the only part of Isumi that had the status of town prior to the 20th century and a place I visited regularly, experienced the closure of two businesses while I was local to the area. These joined a number of premises that had been vacated before I arrived, contributing to a vacant atmosphere along what had once been one of the area's most important streets. When I discussed closures such as these with informants who had been resident in Isumi long-term, the usual reaction was to sigh, shrug and put it down to customers simply choosing to patronize the larger, cheaper, big-box stores on the eastern edge of the city.

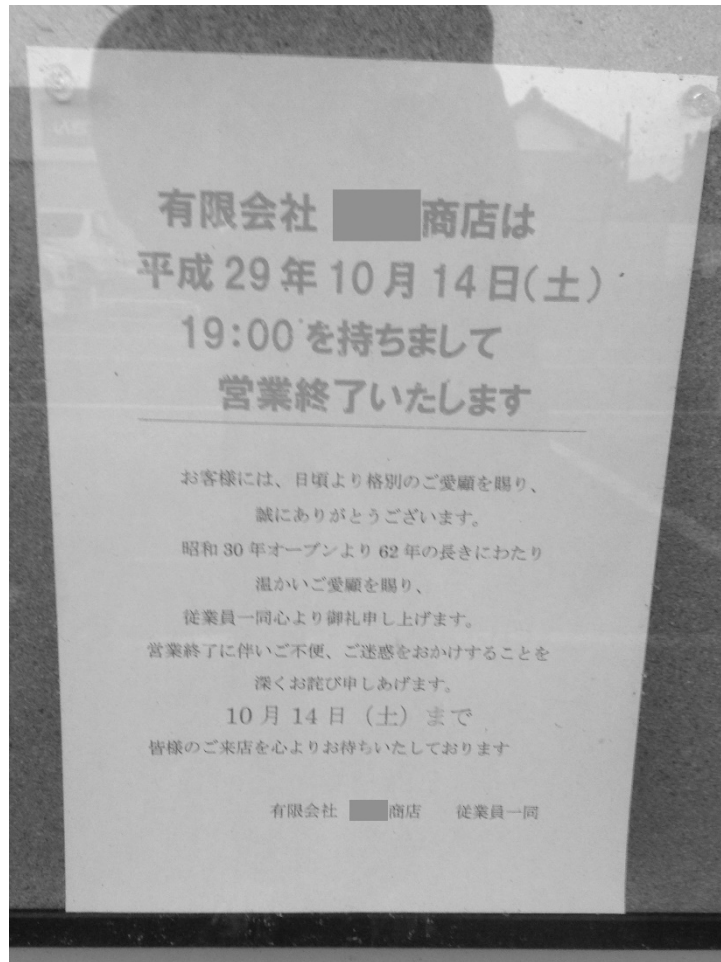


Image 8. A notice posted on a Chōjamachi convenience store announcing its closure after 62 years

As elderly persons, the Yamamuras are among a sector of Japan's population experiencing a rise in feelings of loneliness brought on by a dislocation from contact with others (Allison 2013:122-165; Danely 2019). Being a couple, they did at least have each other, but this was something that could not be said for many of their neighbors and friends. One of the objectives of the Takezumi Kenkyūkai, aside from its task of clearing land for the purpose of acquiring charcoal, was to address the physical, social and psychological needs of such persons simply by affecting a radical change in the creeping rewilding of their lived environment. The mere presence of large numbers of people who turn out to participate in the cutting, gathering and burning of bamboo, despite these at first hand seeming relatively mundane tasks, was a welcome change from the norm

for many whose land was overgrown. The removal of what amounted to invasive weeds became a source of therapy for owners, while conversely, rather than weeds, the NGO received a valuable commodity. Even at smaller events meals would be taken together, with the landholders often providing refreshments, food and conversation. Though it was not the case on the occasion where the Yamamuras' property was cleared, weekend gatherings would regularly include the presence of children as young as newborns, something that was often commented on as having an ameliorating effect on hosts who would otherwise rarely have cause or occasion to socialize with young children.⁵⁸

Yet another positive aspect of the Takezumi Kenkyūkai's activities was that they played a role in introducing locals to the newcomers to Isumi that made up a disproportionate number of the group's participants. On the first day I spent working on the Yamamura's property, of the six people present all but two had been resident in the area for less than ten years and of the remaining two only one was born in Isumi. The presence of outsiders who had chosen to leave the big city and settle in the countryside often had a positive effect, with residents stating that it demonstrated that while many people had left, some new faces were arriving. This was commented on explicitly by Yamamura-san that morning, who did so with the addition of a touch of criticism of less socially engaged members of the city's longstanding population.

It's wonderful to see so many new faces. It's so quiet here now. People don't see a need to come here [inland] much anymore. They don't like to work in the forests and fields and like the conveniences to be had elsewhere.

⁵⁸ Sociologist Morio Onda (2003) has written extensively on the positive effect of mutual help networks and how modern society, especially that of Japan, might do well to consider how the reaffirmation of traditions of public works may go some way to solving public and private social problems in the country. This is a potentiality he especially applies to rural areas, where maintenance of the commons is a pressing matter.

Here, further to his oblique critique of the abandonment of the hill country that had left him and his wife experiencing feelings of isolation, Yamamura-san also raises the other ailment that the Takezumi Kenkyūkai seeks to remedy. For them, and many like them, on top of a psychological struggle there is also the constant physical struggle against the incursion of nature.

“Damn Bamboo”

The overgrown and blocked gully that Taka-san and I found ourselves temporarily lodged in was not only an inconvenience when he reversed his car into it but also a contributor to a problem endemic across areas of Japan experiencing depopulation. Throughout the country, these irrigation channels combine to form a network that if measured in its entirety would total a distance approximately equal to ten times the circumference of the Earth (Takasaki 2010:24). One explanation for Japan’s propensity towards concreting their rivers is that doing so is merely an extension to the source of this elaborate and highly effective means of distributing water for wet-rice cultivation. Where the problem lies is in their maintenance. Of the total, around 80% are managed by land improvement districts comprised of fee-paying member-farmers (MAFF 2003). The remaining one fifth, however, are the responsibility of those who must either independently or collaboratively with peers see to it that they remain in a working condition. Where depopulation, social breakdown and retirement have resulted in their neglect, it quickly becomes evident that *mizo* (“gullies”) are as important for carrying water away from where it is not wanted as they are for taking it to where it is.

Once a rice paddy is abandoned and soil and other detritus obstructs the flow of water through the surrounding irrigation channels, the paddy’s sunken design results in the rapid accumulation of moisture and the development of conditions that favor fast-growing plant species like bamboo. Other than in the temperate northern island of Hokkaidō, bamboo is a characteristic but growing

presence in the landscape of inland Japan. Traditionally a valuable source of both construction materials and food, it has historically been cultivated nearby inhabited areas for convenience, with its tensile strength and ability to be woven useful characteristics when working with it and its sprouts being a major contributor to rural diets (Okutomi et al. 1996).⁵⁹ Under the conditions of their original planting, the groves were controlled by relatively self-sustaining communities as a result of the pressure exerted upon them through these uses. Lacking a population sufficient to either control or create a demand for their outputs, however, the rapid expansion of bamboo forests has been observed throughout various parts of the country (Ogura 1981; Akutsu et al. 2012). Wedged between the road and a hillside, the Yamamuras' former paddy was particularly vulnerable to a rapid overgrowth, and had by the point we arrived totally ceased to be within their ability to control. Over the course of just a few years, plants that further up the mountain had to compete with the forest canopy for sunlight had covertly and incrementally descended from out of the trees and "run totally wild." And despite bamboos importance within Japanese material culture (Gupta & Kumar 2008), this rewilding has so far had nothing but a negative impact on both the human environment of those that live upland (invaded spaces having become impenetrable to little other than mosquitos) and ecological diversity.

Common throughout Asia, bamboo possesses a rhizomic root system in which shoots spread laterally. This ability allows the plant to establish dominance over large areas of suitably moist land if left unchecked, and to do so and significant speed. Able to grow meters in height within a matter of weeks and densely crowd the land on which it is flourishes (Numata 1979), bamboo prevents the emergence of secondary species that would usually follow it and contribute to greater

⁵⁹ Bamboo groves make regular appearances within Japanese folklore, both as a source of resources, such as in *Kaguyahime* ("The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter") and as a place to hide or have things hidden, such as in *Shita-kiri Suzume* ("The Tale of the Tongue-cut Sparrow").

ecological diversity. Historically, this would have been remedied by its comparatively short lifespan of around ten years per cane and the inclusion of its shoots in the diets of animals such as wild boar and, of course, humans. With boar only recently making a comeback in Chiba and humans moving away, the ferocity of the invasion of once productive farmland is such that it shocked even the Yamamuras, both of whom had grown up in the hills. While many members of the Takezumi Kenkyūkai participated in its control for benevolent reasons and bamboo does bring benefits such as the control of soil erosion, animosity towards the plant exists among some to the extent that I oversaw one member that day, who was himself a part-time farmer, feigning a mock slaughter of a particular cane by hacking at its stump with a machete and loudly exclaiming “Damn bamboo!”

The leadership of the Takezumi Kenyūkai take the disdain of some individuals for bamboo in good humor. They can afford to. Their relationship with the plant as an organization is one founded on the idea that by finding a balance with nature through pragmatic means, all stand to benefit. As a *kenkyūkai* or “research group,” their principal aim was to enhance public awareness about ecological security as relating to bamboo, something they had decided to do, however, by literally and figuratively entering the business of selling charcoal to the public. Promoting charcoal as a fuel source and a fertilizer, something they did through workshops, publications, running stalls at festivals and other inventive means, gave them the opportunity to show how resource exploitation could be successful in the long run of ensuring both ecological diversity and human social security. Left as they currently are, many of Japan’s forest ecosystems could become subject to bamboo monocultures but by incentivizing their management and promoting a perpetuation of a lifestyle they described as being embedded in Japanese culture, they could marry both the old and the need for a new approach to inhabiting rural environments.

Monetizing Harmony

Taka-san, who became a member of the Takezumi Kenkyūkai shortly after it was founded, had adopted the ideology of the organization with enthusiasm. Attempting to adjust a lifestyle that he described as “taking it easy” to be more harmonious with the environment around him, he had become an avid gardener and grew an incredible variety of (bamboo charcoal-fed) crops in all the free space around his home.⁶⁰ He claimed that since he had started taking back a bag of the nitrogen-rich fertilizer from every burning and mixing it with his topsoil he had enjoyed the “best tomatoes of his life.” Over lunch on the day I first visited, the Yamamuras also expressed how keen they were to experiment with the much-touted fertilizing properties of what had up until then been largely just a nuisance to them. What struck me was how they described the appropriation of plant feed as an unanticipated boon of taming the “wild” that had encroached on their land. When I asked if they had not used it before when they did farm fulltime, they explained that, like most Japanese farmers, during their active years they had relied on chemical inputs procured from the local agricultural cooperative and tossed or sprayed into the rice fields several times during the growing season. Though they might have burned bamboo occasionally, they had never sought to do much more than eradicate it where necessary. Even with the growing abundance of the plant, locally produced bamboo charcoal remains a relatively expensive and niche product that the Kenkyūkai was able to sell on at a very reasonable price to chain garden centers and *yakitori* (“chicken skewer”) restaurants.⁶¹

⁶⁰ For the vegetation that lay outside of his property, however, because of a reluctance to impose his ideals on plants left to grow wild on other peoples’ land he could only watch as weeds enveloped untended earth.

⁶¹ Interestingly, while the chain garden centers that purchased the product were local (there is obviously more gardening and kitchen gardening in the countryside), the Yakitori restaurants that purchased the charcoal were almost exclusively in Tokyo. With Isumi not lacking local Yakitori-ya, this would imply that the value added through being able to advertise one’s food as being cooked over organic coals was more concentrated in the city, a place where bamboo groves maintained an allure rather than primarily being associated with the status of invasive nuisance.

The business-like approach of the Takezumi-kenkyūkai was something that the local government had come to recognize and endorse. By introducing practices that sought to remonetize abandoned land, the economic focus of the city's policies during amalgamation were legitimated and so they responded with both praise and funding. Another factor that was especially enticing for the city was that the organization managed to balance two conflicting ambitions that they themselves sought to meet. On the one hand, in the promotion of Isumi the city government wished to appeal to potential urban migrants looking for a place to escape to from lives lived under a busy urban modernity to an area that appeared at first sight a rural idyll.⁶² By conducting their activities outdoors, in the mountains and in a collaborative manner the Takezumi Kenkyūkai conformed with the aspirations of many such people, something reflected in the large number of participants being newcomers to the area. On the other hand, by extracting value from the environment that could readily be sold to established businesses, the self-sustaining, capital-driven qualities of the endeavor are plain to see and the economic regeneration of an otherwise struggling municipality obtains greater credibility. The coup de grâce of the group's appeal was that it achieved all this while carrying out what amounts to a welfare service for vulnerable and isolated residents of the city.

One of the key contributors to their success has how adept the Takezumi Kenkyūkai is at self-promotion. They produce flyers, set up stalls giving out information and free samples of the product at local festivals, they organized a small-scale conference at a community center and have even produced clothing and apparel emblazoned with their name. Perhaps the most effective of their efforts, however, is their avid use of the internet and social media in disseminating

⁶² By which I mean the romanticized image of the countryside that presents it as a happier and healthier place detached from the troubles that afflict life in the city. Popular and national culture in Japan reinforces this fanciful imagined space.

information about their activities. When I first began participating with the group there was always at least one member responsible for taking photos during and following each event so that they could be uploaded onto the group's Facebook page. Overtime, this practice was refined to the extent that a dedicated website was created to allow for online purchases and that also includes write-ups and posed photographs depicting the steadily rising participant numbers attending almost weekly events. These posts are then mirrored across a variety of platforms to ensure maximum visibility and provide multiple venues for people to discuss and be seen to be discussing the group, its activities and its ideology.



Image 9. The Takezumi Kenkyūkai following an event holding placards that convey the group's principles

In the above photograph, one of many like it, the group projects a curated image of the fruits of its labor. Aside from the large trough of charcoal in the foreground, the viewer is made a party to the pleasant outdoor environment in which work is conducted, the smiling faces and jubilant poses of

a community pulled together from different age groups and genders, and, squarely in the front, a placard that confidently states the ways in which “bamboo charcoal saves the world.”⁶³ And while this hyperbolic declaration is acknowledged as such by the group’s founders, from the perspective of those for whom the rewilding of inhabited spaces is causing an appreciable destruction of their social environments, the activities of the Takezumi Kenkyūkai are having a profound effect. In reverting space to a more heavily human-mediated condition and enlivening it with sociality, if only temporarily, their own corner of an “unnatural” world *is* being saved.

It is the nature of the Takezumi Kenkyūkai’s work that their activities are conducted in what appear rustic corners of a nostalgia-laden rural Japan that hold an appeal to urbanites seeking to move to “marginal communities” and make for themselves better, more fulfilling lives. In this they are not only encouraged by popular renditions of the countryside as an idyllic retreat,⁶⁴ but also by a Japanese central government keen to entice repopulation of areas in decline. The *Chiiki Okoshi Kyōryokutai* (“Regional Revitalization Cooperation Corps”), of which one of the Takezumi Kenkyūkai’s founders was a member, was established in 2009 as a creative means of harnessing this intrepid enthusiasm and attempting to see it scale (Klein 2020:xv). Similar to other members of the corps situated throughout the country, Rinka-san had applied to be assigned a region deemed to be struggling by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication. Leaving a life as a clerical assistant in a town on the outskirts of Tokyo, she had come to Isumi after it was selected for her

⁶³ “Takezumi ha chikyū wo sukū” – Literally “Bamboo charcoal saves the Earth”

⁶⁴ A significant contributor to the promotion of the rural idyll to a popular Japanese audience was a regular segment in the long-running television show Tetsuwa DASH. Titled Dash-mura (“Dash Village”), the format entailed following members of the popular boyband Tokio as they contributed to the rejuvenation of a rural corner of Japan through traditional farming methods. The show’s transmission came to a dramatic halt, however, when the Fukushima nuclear incident in 2011 revealed that the filming location kept secret in order to protect its rustic charm had been evacuated due to it falling within the radiation exclusion zone (Brasor 2017). Several of the I-Turners and U-Turners I met while in the field referenced the Nippon TV show, citing it as a motivating factor in their own decision to explore the tenability of adopting a rural, self-sufficient livelihood.

from among a multitude of choices. Following arrival, a salary and logistical support were provided with the understanding that these would be put towards establishing a program to promote the city's revitalization. When it came to choosing what exactly she would do, Rinka-san was given relative freedom,⁶⁵ only being required to ensure that whatever initiative she chose was carried out in cooperation with local residents. Thus, following several months finding her feet, not long after my arrival in the field the Takezumi Kenkyūkai was formed.

The Takezumi Kenkyūkai was not the only initiative to come out of Isumi's cohort of Chiiki Okoshi Kyōryokutai members.⁶⁶ One of Rinka-san's fellows had partnered with the city's hunting society and was largely behind Isumi's efforts in the promotion of foodstuffs and leather made from wild boar and *kyon* ("dwarf deer") captured in an effort to protect farmland. Yet another worked on an initiative in which wild game and *sansei* ("mountain vegetables") were branded as Isumi produce and marketed at specialist food fairs in Tokyo and beyond. Both of these examples demonstrate the extent to which the program is focused on providing assistance to the pre-existing population in a multitude of ways while encouraging initiative and ingenuity among the participants. For this reason, the numbers of people dispatched throughout the country has steadily risen since its inauguration, especially attracting members of the younger generations (20s-30s) who might struggle to relocate to the countryside as individuals with no apparent reason to do so.

The extent to which participation in a program like the Chiiki Okoshi Kyōryokutai provides a benefit to those departing for the countryside should not be underestimated. In a context outside of the activities of the kyōryokutai, the legitimization that comes from an association with a

⁶⁵ One of the kyōryokutai's other members confessed to me that they had actually been given a little too much freedom, having been assigned an unoccupied room in city hall from which to base their activities but other than that largely left to their own devices.

⁶⁶ Each region receives a cohort rather than individuals, though they are encouraged to pursue independent initiatives.

government-backed initiative was demonstrated to me when I heard gossip at my local itobata kaigi. A young man, Kōsuke-kun, who I would later get to know very well, was renting a property near to my own cul-de-sac in an attempt to establish it as a communal living space. Though he would later throw himself into a variety of voluntary activities that provided him a network of acquaintances, he first arrived without any familial association or membership of an organization. This lack of affiliation struck the housewives in my area as being odd to the point of transgressive, an assessment I was sympathetic to as an anthropologist, illustrating how important it remains to be able to demonstrate structural affiliations in Japan.

Just as was the case for Kōsuke-kun, for many people the business practices of groups like the Takezumi Kenkyūkai are a secondary concern, if they enter their minds at all. The vast majority of attendees at the public events I was present at were there on a voluntary basis.⁶⁷ Encouraged by the idea that their efforts would be put towards healing both a human and a natural environment experiencing maladies brought about by a lack of available labor, participants of all ages would regularly throw themselves into the strenuous (if short-term) activity of sawing and carrying the cut bamboo cane with abandon. The task was by no means easy or entirely safe, it should be noted, as clumping bamboo can grow under enormous tension if the canes intersect and “explode” when this tension is suddenly released by being cut. That is not to mention the splinters and the bites inflicted by mosquitoes that thrive in the warm, wet environment of a bamboo grove swollen with potential victims. Nevertheless, despite the conditions under which the work is conducted, the number of people in attendance has continued to increase, as has the proportion of those who travel from outside of the region in order to participate. Partially because of Isumi’s relative proximity

⁶⁷ The group held both private and public sessions where land would be cleared, the former being attended by the core group of members and the latter being heavily advertised and welcoming an unpredictable number of both new and old faces to the task.

to Tokyo, much of the credit is due, however, to the groups devotion to building a social media presence that markets the experience as green tourism for those from the city wishing to escape to the country for brief periods.

In the last decade volunteerism and green tourism have moved to the fore of the Japanese consciousness as a means of revitalizing the nation (Kein 2020). The events of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, as well as the perceived ineffectiveness of the government response, brought a great deal of attention to the plights of communities suffering as a result of damage and isolation. What followed was a large rise in citizen-led relief projects that took rebuilding beyond infrastructural repair by seeking restore a community spirit said to have been lost in the move from a predominantly rural to a predominantly urban society. With a culture that has long been known to invest a great deal of energy into education and the subsequent commitment to work and family, the extent to which volunteerism emerged as departure of sorts from an inward-looking devotion to the betterment of the self is worthy of note. It has become acceptable, if not a duty, to look beyond one's immediate locality and one's own career for opportunities to do one's part by helping to secure economic security.

When I asked what had motivated the attendance of one participant in a Takezumi Kenkyūkai event who had arrived with his wife and two young children, the gentleman, Andō-san, expressed that while he and his family were happy in their lives in the city and saw no reason to move elsewhere, they longed to supplement the urban experience with those of the countryside. With Isumi within a couple of hours drive of their metropolitan home thanks to the convenient if expensive Aqualine expressway, the couple considered their weekends an opportunity to experience “old” or “traditional” Japan in places where “values are different and in need of support.” For them, travel and manual labor had become something of an allochronic educational experience

where they, as modern Japanese citizens, could expose themselves and their children to “their origins.”

The Takezumi Kenkyūkai wasn't the only beneficiary of the Andos' patronage, as they were avowed volunteers of initiatives across the Bōsō peninsula and regularly attended similar events and activities staged by several of other NGOs that have been created in the region during the last decade. It was thus with only mild surprise that I bumped into them several months after our first meeting when we mutually attended a river cleaning event in an entirely different part of Isumi. This particular village was running a program designed to create and maintain an environment capable of supporting fireflies. This they were doing as a means of drawing tourists to one of Isumi's most remote villages. Here too Ando-san and his wife lamented that activities such as firefly viewing were not properly available in the city. Sure, they could attend one of the firefly-viewing festivals put on at urban temples or in some parks, but these generally rely on the importation of the larvae for the occasion and do not aspire to establish a sustainable insect population.⁶⁸ For Andō-san and others for whom authenticity played a role in the value they invested in entertainments built out of traditional behavior, rural events are granted greater prestige and moral virtue.

Households were not the only groups of people that would attend bamboo clearing events together on weekends. Participants were also comprised of young Japanese (mostly) university graduates, many of whom were still in the process of seeking work or just getting their feet on the first rung of the salaried employee career ladder. For these individuals who were less secure in their urban

⁶⁸ Naïve though it may sound, it was not until a conversation with an attendant at the yearly firefly viewings that take place at Yokohama's Sankei-en (a well-known sculpted garden that once sat on the coast), that I myself realized the often 'unnatural' quality of such events. In the case of Sankei-en this should have been especially obvious owing to the grounds being located between a dense urban area and the industrial belt built on land reclaimed from Tokyo Bay.

lives, participation in volunteerism in the countryside served as a means of reassurance that their pursuit of an urban livelihood during a period of profound economic uncertainty was not an all or nothing endeavor. Escaping to the country on weekends became a means of laying the groundwork for a more permanent flight should structural forces bind them to the lower paid and less desirable jobs the city has to offer. Despite often being unwilling to entirely abandon the institutional structures that they had been channeled through throughout all of their lives, many of those I met this way inclined were acutely aware that satisfaction with their urban livelihoods would not be guaranteed even if they were successful in navigating their work and personal lives. In the majority of cases among this age group relocation at some point was considered a foregone conclusion, what they lacked were the local connections necessary to make transitioning as devoid of problems as possible. The Takezumi Kenkyūkai thus became a broker in providing a forum for peers to meet, connect with potential local and newcomer contacts, and foment greater devotion to the ideologies of “green” and sustainable living that the organization advocated.

Kōsuke-kun, the occupant of the property near my own that had raised my neighbors’ eyebrows when he had first arrived, differed from the norm in this regard, but for good reason. After graduating from a mid-tier university in Tokyo he had spent a year volunteering abroad before returning to a relatively monotonous job at a publishing company. Concurrent with his development of a dissatisfaction with his life and job prospects in the city, he had been struck by the tragedy of losing his mother to cancer. As his father had also passed away some years before, he decided to abandon the family home and forge himself a new life in Isumi as an aspiring pioneer

in communal living.⁶⁹ A rare example of a financially independent young adult,⁷⁰ he had the freedom to put his wealth into restoring a home that could then provide a launching pad for others like him wishing to build for themselves a new life. As his project got off the ground, the “co-tenants” of his home grew to include both preexisting acquaintances and some of the weekend visitors he got to know while participating in activities laid on by NGOs like the Takezumi Kenkyūkai. Whether or not his ambition to establish a flourishing “halfway house” for domestic I-turn migrants will be successful it is difficult to say. Like my own, his decision to choose a property close to a railway station made sense from practical perspective but did undermine the extent to which he was able to give his co-tenants a taste of the more dispersed and, frankly, isolating qualities of Japan’s countryside. What is more, he had also yet to entirely win over the other residents of our village when I left, the very idea of communal living being alien to many. Unlike those living further inland, our neighbors benefited from proximity to the strip of land by the coast that enjoys the easiest access to services. Where we lived, the ability to maintain the critical mass required to function as a community was not yet in question and so the concessions necessary in welcoming outsiders were not yet as great. Like the citizens of the town of Kodaira studied by Jennifer Robertson in her monograph *Native and Newcomer* (1991), those who claim the status of “nativeness” may maintain enough self-assurance to be as inclined towards greeting incoming migrants with a degree of suspicion rather than purely open arms.

⁶⁹ Communal living spaces, also known as share houses or co-living spaces, are an alternative accommodation option that has risen in popularity among the young in Japan for their ability to provide residents with an active source of socialization at an affordable price. Differing from regular share houses where acceptance of a room is based purely on one’s ability to pay rent, communal living spaces form nodes in interconnected networks with specific ideological outlooks.

⁷⁰ His lack of close familial expectations on the kind of life course he chose may also have contributed to his ability to act independently.

Conclusion

The success of the Takezumi Kenkyūkai emerges out of the disparities between rural and urban Japan. The countryside suffers from economic and population decline, which contributes to a concomitant fall in the ability of the region to support modernist lifestyles; while the city suffers from being considered overly modern. NGOs such as the Takezumi Kenkyūkai are able to appeal to the two groups most able to respond to these conditions, privileged members of stable middleclass with the wherewithal to adopt green tourism as an form of moral exercise and those that an unencumbered stage in their life where major forks in career trajectory do not represent an abandonment of accrued status. These are likewise stories of success. For one, security that success has been achieved and for the other fear that it will not be achieved. Although these parties have conflicting identities, they are able to unite in a shared ideology that rural Japanese society possesses a value that is worth maintaining. The Yamamuras land is thus cleared through a combination of differing selfhoods that complement each other rather than compete.

For the residents of Isumi who are suffering from a depreciation in their quality of life owing to a triage approach to the provision of infrastructure and economic support, the Takezumi Kenkyūkai's efforts hold the rewilding of their communities at bay and offer a glimmer of hope that there may be a future in which some sort of human/nature equilibrium is reestablished. Where I think the greatest immediate risk lies, however, is not in fact with Yamamuras or Andō-san and families like his but with those members of the younger generations who strike out into the countryside hoping to build livelihoods on the back of alternative lifestyles. Established residents in Isumi, by enlarge, support initiatives that seek to enhance the economic and social vitality of the city. Nevertheless, few see niche products such a bamboo charcoal as being a realistic base on

which to rebuild inland economies and communities. Day trippers and recent graduates may be drawn to the area but the ability to scale their activities is lacking.

The Takezumi Kenkyūkai is compelling because it demonstrates how the revitalization of rural Japan seems to rely on an interchange between the country and the city, even according to the rhetoric of local governments keen to appear self-reliant. In Isumi, through the formation of NGOs local residents and newcomers have been able to tap into the complimentary desires of this binary and “sell” an experience that without a more integral output will remain fleeting. Irrespective of all the praise the Takezumi Kenkyūkai receives and the pleasure to be had in participating in their activities, there is a reason that spending is still being funneled towards agricultural rationalization projects on the coast and not into maintaining the fields, gullies, or even the schools of uphill communities. The clearing of bamboo is an evocative initiative but finding a means of feeding at scale the more substantial desires of a Japan that has only grown to be more concentrated in urban spaces since the Takezumi Kenkyūkai’s foundation remains the ambition.

CHAPTER FIVE

Farming Community

Introduction

March 22nd, 2005, marked the day on which the borders of Ōhara, Isumi and Misaki were radically redefined. Yet for farmers living within those borders, this reimagining did not tally with the manner in which their industry had been developing. Despite mechanization and the introduction of chemical inputs during the 20th century having vastly reduced the human labor required to engage in cultivation, the majority of farming families in Japan have resisted rationalization of their land into larger units and, in consort, imports have become a greater contributor to the national food supply (Niehaus & Walravens 2018: Introduction). Isumi's farmers, for the most part, have been no different, with the majority that I interacted with over the course of my two years in the city conforming with the inclination of households towards a perpetuation of the profession solely on a part-time basis. In this context, agricultural cooperatives had become the means of functioning at scale, supporting a highly dependent industry by providing the seedlings, fertilizers, machinery, distribution infrastructure and the loans necessary to maintain an increasingly infirm farming body (Mulgan 2002:112).

Within this final chapter I will demonstrate through an examination of Isumi's farmers, both new and old, how finding a balance between renewing agriculture in a manner that is both ethical and economical is a contentious exercise. Inhabitants of rural communities are adopting differential and sometimes opposing approaches in response to the decline in their industry, as well as broader social issues afflicting contemporary Japan. By studying the approaches (and conflicts) of three parties in particular, I shall explore the various successes and trials experienced by these

groups and consider how they interact to form new networks of community within a newly consolidated region.

Matsuda Farm

Located within a wide valley just north of the narrow range of unsettled hills that encouraged Ōhara to develop into the most densely populated of all of Isumi's settlements, the area surrounding Matsuda Farm appears at first glance to be fairly typical of countryside throughout rural Japan. Individual paddies growing *koshihikari* (a popular variety of Japanese rice) of between 0.5 and 1 hectares cover the valley floor, while homes hug the hillsides in order to avoid encroaching on the productive space once allotted to the families that inhabited them. Where this valley differs, however, is that unlike locations where one or two rice fields might make up the entire estate of a household relying on farming for only a small portion of their income, the majority of those in this valley are owned and managed by a single family, the Matsudas.

The patriarchs of the Matsuda family have, over the last 70 years, demonstrated a distinctly entrepreneurial approach to their profession. This aptitude for enterprise was first expressed around the conclusion of World War II, when the grandfather of the present-day Matsuda-san, my informant, chose to overlook the national government's decision to end the "traditional" succession system.⁷¹ Instead of bending to pressure to commit to dividing the family's property equally between his children on his death, he insisted on maintaining the practice of primogeniture

⁷¹ The *ie* has a stem rather than joint or conjugal structure, always forming a household with one and only one married couple in each generation. The shedding of male children known as "second sons" lies at the core of family continuity in Japan and is just as important as finding an heir and successor. Families whose prosperity depends significantly on the personal capacity of the household head tend to prefer a highly capable adopted son-in-law over an incompetent natural son as successor and heir. Despite the law that inheritance should be divided equally between all children, family land or property can often not stand such division, and non-inheriting children will sign away their rights for the sake of the *ie*, if one of their number agrees to take on the responsibility for the family home (Hendry 1996:36; Marshall 2017).

in which the right to inherit land falls solely to the firstborn male child. The elder Matsuda-san did this by persuading all of his younger children to relinquish ‘voluntarily’ their claims and instead pursue alternative careers or marry into other farming families. What is more, he combined this policy with the gradual purchase of surrounding properties made available by those who did not choose his course and whose children had interests that lay in other ‘fields’. This meant that when Matsuda-san’s father became the head-of-household in the mid-1970s, he inherited a quantity of land that qualified him as the dominant landholder in both the valley and much of what is now contemporary Isumi. This pattern has repeated with his son, the present Matsuda patriarch, who continues to increase the family’s land holdings whenever the opportunity presents itself. The expansionist and consolidatory approach to agriculture of the Matsudas is one that has made the family stand out where many small rice farms continue to operate primarily thanks to rented labor-saving technology and government subsidies, securing for themselves economic resources as well as local political influence.

The relative wealth of the Matsuda family was emphatically demonstrated to me the first time I visited their home. A short distance from the main road that skirted the valley’s steep hillside, the house was a recent construction but completed in a style designed to mimic classical Japanese architecture. Its dark wooden frame and white plaster provided definition, while the eaves of the gently sloping roof projected more than a meter beyond the walls and were turned upwards in a manner similar to those of a temple. What is more, even before I reached the main building, I passed through an imposing structure reminiscent of the Asakusa *kaminarimon* (“thundergate”), the entranceway to one of Tokyo’s most well-known places of worship and tourist attractions. Had Matsuda-san not pointed out in a show of modesty during one of our conversations that he wished his home lay on the opposite side of the valley so that his garden might benefit from better sunlight,

I would doubtless have concluded it was the most enviable domestic property I had ever set foot in while living in Japan.

In spite of the ostentatiousness of his home, Matsuda-san was himself an incredibly down to earth person. Having learned from a mutual friend of ours that I was living in the area and interested in Japanese agriculture, he had been persuaded to meet me to discuss his family history and his personal opinions of the industry's likely future. The interviews I conducted with him were always relatively formal, he being my superior in both age and status, but always occurred while we sat sipping cups of warm barley tea and eating large numbers of rice crackers delivered by one of his daughters. I would learn during our second meeting that she, while not his eldest, was the one whose husband had some years ago been adopted into the family and who would himself eventually become the next head of the Matsuda household.⁷²

Reflecting on his own childhood and entrance into agriculture, Matsuda-san expressed gratitude for having been given the opportunity to maintain farming as his sole profession despite having initially been somewhat reluctant. More rural then than even today, when he was a boy in the late 1950s and early 60s Isumi had seemed far less exciting than the “big city” owing to its comparatively out-of-the-way location and little having changed despite the socio-cultural developments brought about by Japan's loss of World War II and the US occupation.⁷³ With hindsight, however, he acknowledged that his perception of the metropolis was one colored by rose-tinted spectacles. While his was not a particularly wealthy family during the immediate post-war period he knew that taking up the position of heir meant a secure income and a certain degree

⁷² The practice of adopting a daughter's husband into a family in order to secure a male heir continues in contemporary Japan. This A *mukoyōshi* (“adopted heir”) will take on the family name, perpetuating the *ie* while simultaneously demonstrating its transcendence of and one individual or even paternal bloodline.

⁷³ Despite my use of “Isumi,” Matsuda-san most often used *Misakichō* or *tōchi* (“this place”) when referring to the place in which he lived, this having been the district's name throughout much of his life.

of cultural capital. The alternative of travelling to Chiba City or Tokyo would, for someone of his educational background, likely have meant taking temporary jobs in the construction or manufacturing industries that had become so essential in the aftermath of the war. These positions, though they allowed workers to travel home during the busy planting and harvest periods to assist on their family's farms (Abegglen 1958:26), would have meant low wages and an itinerant existence; and while class division diminished in the country during the economic miracle of the 1960s and beyond, with "company-as-family" gradually growing to include those in blue-collar professions (Kondo 1990: 175), the assumption of a role that would lead to the headship of his family meant ownership of property and a gradual adoption of middleclass standing.

The concept of class in Japan is a complex one and especially so when discussing the status granted to farmers. Up until the late-19th century, the state-endorsed a feudal hierarchy that placed the peasantry in what technically amounted to a position of prestige, in as far as the profession was held in greater ideological esteem than "skilled trades" and commerce, but one that was deprived of the agency afforded by either wealth or a freedom of movement (Vogel 1963; MacLachlan & Shimizu 2016). Two key historical moments shook up this status-quo. The first of these, the Meiji Restoration, had the monumental impact of abolishing the feudal system and replacing it with what was a relative equalitarianism that assigned farmers the new status of *heimin* ("commoner").⁷⁴ For Matsuda-san, however, the more radical change came about as a result of the second historical moment, the US occupation. One of the first enactments of the occupying forces was the creation of a constitution that guaranteed broad human rights to all citizens (Article 14, Japanese Constitution of 1946). Though this initially allowed for the formation of trade unions and other

⁷⁴ The samurai, who had for two hundred years of peace served essentially as bureaucrats, were allowed to perpetuate their positions of authority by transitioning into a status much like the aristocracy or upper classes of Europe during the same period.

collaborative parties invested in the welfare of members of the working class, the intensification of the Cold War that pitted capitalist West against communist East resulted in a diminishing of their power as militants were weeded out and firms and policies that encouraged a paternalistic relationship between employer and salaried employee were promoted (Mulgan 2002:69). Even though this did not directly affect farmers, who for the most part had been granted ownership of their land and who were thus their own bosses, an ideology in which workers were taught to become a productive, obedient and loyal members of their company became the norm (Kondo 1990). This led the farming population to choose to take the path that resulted in the greatest social capital by identifying themselves as business owners and thus members of the rapidly growing middle class.

A further boost to the status of farmers that benefitted the social positions of the Matsuda family came in the early 1970s. Stockpiling of grain by the Soviet Union in the early part of the decade resulted in the price of wheat and corn souring internationally. This then had a knock-on effect on worldwide grain markets, with their reliability thrown into doubt as trade disputes erupted in other commodities. In response to anxieties over food self-sufficiency, the Japanese government began taking on a much more interventionist approach to the food supply, with the country's staple crop, rice, receiving new levels of protectionism (Love 2007:547). With industry thriving, the dangers of food insecurity became an Achilles' heel worth defending. In response, those responsible for domestic food production were lauded as valued contributors to society and accrued a political influence that outweighed their size relative to the rest of the population. Within this climate the Matsuda's growing monopoly of local rice farming would have become a huge boost in the family's prestige. Over the years, however, the tenuous efficiencies of the Japanese agricultural industry have only become more evident and the limits of protectionism tested. From the 1990s

onwards, Matsuda-san, in spite of being bolstered by his ability to acquire the land of others leaving an industry in decline, sought greater long-term security for his own and his family's future. He saw the implementation of new approaches to reducing his spending and increasing his economies of scale as essential to the maintenance of his one-crop business's ability to compete with cheap international imports.⁷⁵

Granted capital and the freedom to experiment by his monopoly over local rice farming, Matsuda-san was pragmatic in his response to an international competition that took the form of not only foreign producers importing traditionally Japanese foodstuffs but also newly imported eating practices. As we sat drinking tea in his home he mused while wearing a sardonic smile that establishments like the McDonalds restaurant that stood less than ten minutes' drive from his home were contributing to the diminishing importance of rice within the Japanese diet.

This Western food, it's convenient but it's not the same [as rice]. It's doesn't satisfy you.

For breakfast, maybe, it's good with coffee but hamburgers I could never eat. Why would I?⁷⁶

While rice once constituted an essential component of every Japanese meal (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993), a Westernization of culinary habits combined with increased demand for meat, bread and dairy products has resulted in per capita consumption declining by more than half in the fifty years between 1960 and 2010 (MAFF 2018). In light of this, a dominance over a shrinking market still did not provide Matsuda-san the reassurance that his methods need not change. His enthusiastic

⁷⁵ For further reading on the impact of international trade on Japanese agriculture see Niehaus & Walravens (2017) and Freiner (2018).

⁷⁶ My attempts to defend bread by pointing out that the commonly purchased bread eaten in Japan isn't necessarily of the same quality as that which is found abroad or even that sold at the many family-run bakeries to be found in Isumi did not sway his opinion. That said, my own proclivities ally me somewhat with Matsuda-san's opinion, perceiving, as I do, bread as a side or a snack rather than the staple around which to build a meal.

adoption of farming machinery to improve efficiency was one method of allowing him to maintain economies of scale, the other major contributor was his use of temporary migrant labor as a means of reducing his overheads.

The *Ginō Jisshū Seido* (“Technical Intern Training Program” - TITP) was established in 1993 as a means of sourcing from elsewhere in Asia a labor force that would support industries experiencing a shortage of available personal (Yoshida 2021). Temporary visas are issued to foreign trainees for a maximum of five years,⁷⁷ after which recipients are required to leave the country or alter their status. The program has been an especially effective means of filling labor shortages in areas such as elderly care provision and agriculture but has not done so without courting criticism. Accusations have been leveled against the program accusing it of suffering from poor oversight, of being exploitative and even (according to some sources) tantamount to the use of “slave labor” (Ozawa 2014).

Matsuda-san explained to me that he seasonally employed at least two individuals in the country under the terms on the TITP. While their primary work was in vegetable farming, he had been able to negotiate an arrangement with their regular employer whereby they would assist him during the busiest times of the year for a rice farmer, namely, during planting and harvest. While he was certainly grateful for the assistance they provided, Matsuda-san made it clear from his manner of discussing his temporary workers and their abilities that they were considered subordinate to the point of being treated in a manner similar to children. From where we sat, the two of us were able to observe the barn in which two of his current migrant laborers were sorting trays of seedlings. Pointing in their direction, he used the diminutive “*anoko tachi*” (“those kids”) to refer to them

⁷⁷ The limit was originally set at three years but was extended in 2017 due to complaints that staff would be required to leave their jobs only just as they had obtained the training necessary to be considered suitably proficient.

and the difficulty in communicating the nuance of the work at hand due to their limited knowledge of the Japanese language. Provided with a room to share during their stay, they would reportedly spend much of their free time either recovering from their workload or taking the long bus ride to Tokyo to socialize with friends who worked at other farms or in other occupations in the metropolis' environs. As a result, outside of a position of subordination in a generational hierarchy, neither the Matsudas or the workers' other employer reportedly established any great bond with the trainees. For their part, working as they did as just a pair and moving between farms, the two would have had little ability to assert their rights, a factor further contributing to social isolation.

Despite adopting a paternalistic disposition in which he professed his desire to see them improve in both their farming skills and language ability, Matsura-san's attitude towards his trainees betrays a reality in which he places his staff in a position of obligation towards him that, given the extent to which agriculture has become reliant of migrant labor, disregards the extent to which he is becoming dependent on outside assistance. Should his two temporary employees have chosen to turn down his offer of work (an unlikely prospect considering their reliance on his friend as an employer and guarantor able to provide them with a working visa), his tight margins mean he would have been in a very difficult position due to having to hire domestic alternatives at much greater cost. By his own admission, those under the terms of the TITP trainees should not be splitting their time across multiple employers. The presence of migrant labor, however, has allowed for the questionable perpetuation of a form of "zombie" agriculture whereby the industry continues to function but without the presence of an established community around it.

The inter-personal relationships workers experience as participants of the TITP results in Japan's migrant farmers having little opportunity to establish a life free from the gaze of their employer. Should Isumi come to rely upon immigration as a supposed panacea for the economic

woes of its agricultural industry, it will do so in a manner that perpetuates only one approach to farming—a form of rationalization that discards domestic autonomy and the self-sufficiency to which it once aspired. By incentivizing the reduction of established participants through the adoption of temporary immigration as a Band-Aid (an immigration often colored by an ethno-nationalism that actually obstructs the long-term settlement of new entrants to the farming sector), the city risks falling short in providing opportunities for a repopulation of its countryside. For Matura-san, efforts to align the Japanese family farm with rationalization practices make economic sense but does little to foster the community relationships that allow for the maintenance of the social landscape of the inaka of which he is fond. While he and his successors may well remain successful in their business during the years to come, meeting the ideals of the capitalist modernization project could leave it an increasingly isolated place sapped of the capacity to evoke nostalgia and located in a characterless environment.

Permaculture Homestead

Throughout my fieldwork I was an active member of an NGO informally referred to as Iraken, a portmanteau derived from its full name: *Isumi Raifusutairu Kenkyūkai* (“Isumi Lifestyle Research Group”). Iraken had been formed several years after the city’s amalgamation in order to act as a city booster, consultant and networking agency. One of the few city-wide, semi-voluntary organizations composed in approximately equal parts of newcomers and locals, it maintained a physical office and regularly interacted with city authorities and other NGOs in managing a multitude of initiatives designed to benefit Isumi’s residents, particularly with an eye for the ecological wellbeing of the environments that they live in. The group’s website was actually one of the first things to lead me to consider Isumi as a research site, and not long after my arrival I

began regularly attending their weekly meetings and participating in many of the events that they ran and helped to organize.

Located in what had once been a clothing shop on Chōjamachi shōtengai, the large glass windows, ample advertising flyers and the position of the office near a local train station lent it the air of a tourist office, a role it also sought to fill. In addition to the amount of inter and intra-city networks that the group was heavily involved in, it would regularly receive drop-in visits from those arriving by the local train or stopping by car at the disused patch of land by a playground close by. In addition to tourists, these drop-ins could include local business owners wanting to consult on advertising through the group's social media accounts, prospective migrants wishing to make inquiries about the availability of property, city bureaucrats wishing to check in on their activities, and participants in their community-led experience tourism, among others. On one occasion, just prior to the weekly meeting when I had been left to man the desk while the only other core member present went to the local shop, a young couple in their early twenties entered. Once they had gotten over the initial confusion of being greeted by a very obvious foreigner, the two explained that they were looking for a place called the "Permaculture Homestead" and inquired if I knew of its location. Never having heard of the place, it was only after the return of Nana-chan, the Iraken member who usually manned the desk, that I would learn of a site just a short distance from where we stood but concealed behind a thick wall of vegetation that was consciously maintained. The homestead, it would transpire, would become one of my most intriguing objects of study during my entire two years in the area. Through getting to know its occupiers, I would learn of the complicated position some newcomers to Isumi occupy in their relationship with agriculture, the environment and the neighbors with which they share it.

Established in early 2016 on the grounds of a partially reclaimed kominka, the Permaculture Homestead aims to be a site at which those concerned with the alleged unsustainability of the contemporary agroindustry (and modernity in general) can learn non-intensive ways of both producing food and interacting with their environments. The term “permaculture” derives from “permanent agriculture” and designates a design concept in which the landscape determines the food grown upon it and the maintenance of sustainability is held paramount. Originating in Australia in the 1960s as a response to industrial farming methods that relied on non-renewable inputs (Dunwell 2016), over the decades that followed it spread internationally on the back of an activist approach to confronting the effects of factory farming and the establishment of homesteads that evangelize its methods (Perry 2013). By the mid-1990s permaculture had reached Japan, with ‘schools’ opening throughout the country that taught the basic principles of the method in consort with its related philosophies.⁷⁸

The two founders of the Permaculture Homestead, much like myself, had chosen Isumi at least partially because of its proximity to Tokyo. Both had previously participated in the wave of young non-locals who had travelled to the north-west of Japan following the 3.11 disaster and, heartened by the warm reception they experienced from existing residents caught in the labor of rebuilding their lives following the catastrophe, sought to create a similar haven for people of various backgrounds to work towards building a community network. Another factor in their decision was the pre-existence of a long-established commune and restaurant further inland owned and operated

⁷⁸ Permaculture is considered by its practitioners not merely a method of farming but also a philosophy. This philosophy is founded upon a recognition of all the elements that make up an environment rather than any one part in isolation. This contrasts it with monoculture, where crops are seeded in an environment designed to cater only to their optimal growing conditions through the use of fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, irrigation, and an array of machinery. Where the practice attains the level of philosophy is in the manner in which this outlook is applied to all aspects of life. Non-aggression in managing social relationships is aspired towards and a non-reliance upon outside inputs stretches to include many items of technology commonly taken for granted. This was reflected in the interactions that took place at the Permaculture Homestead and the eschewing of all but the most necessary of reliance upon public services such as plumbing and heating.

by a couple composed of a Japanese macrobiotic food pioneer and her American professional photographer husband. I would hold that it is this couple in particular that have been responsible for the steady stream of alternative food and lifestyle practitioners to Isumi, with their presence consistently drawing migrants to the region who then go on to set up their own projects. This feedback loop has continued to contribute to local in-migration, now carried out by approximately three generations of aspirant urban to rural farmers.

Another similarity between both the Permaculture Homestead founders and the established couple is their international backgrounds. The Permaculture Homestead founders had both lived internationally as a result of their mixed parentage and possess fluency in both Japanese and English. This factor has allowed them to tap into international and domestic nodes of the organic and alternative food movement in attracting funding and participation in their project. Similarly, while many of those that I grew to know to be regular attendants of their events considered themselves to be more inward looking and conducting regular working lives, graduates of some of Japan's elite universities with in-demand qualifications were also drawn to the ideals and ambitions of the two founders and what they sought to build in Isumi.

Both Japanese and foreign visitors interested in permaculture and its ideology are able to stay and work at the homestead in a minimally managed fashion or attend classes that teach skills such as gardening, carpentry, meditation and sustainable living more generally. Part of a global movement united behind a relatively flexible methodology, its founders adhere to a philosophy in which community and collaboration are of utmost importance:

The vision of this place is to co-create a refuge/retreat for peace activists, and train the next generation of integral nonviolence practitioners. (Peace and Permaculture Dojo 2020).



Image 10. The Permaculture Homestead early in its renovation

Situated on an area approximately the size of a soccer field, when I first visited the Permaculture Homestead it was made up of the still derelict kominka, several outbuildings and mixed woodland and vegetable gardens. Over the course of my two years in Isumi the main building underwent steady renovation and the grounds were brought into a state of relative order. Though the principals of permaculture precluded any major reworking of the land's characteristics, a small rice field was rented from a neighboring farmer as a means of including the symbolically important crop in their homegrown diets. Despite this progress, what hampered the project was the extent of the non-interventionist approach of its founders. With a program of improvements being made principally by way of voluntary participation in activities such as wall plastering, land clearing and general construction rather than following a thorough survey and by design, progress was slow and expensive. I was shocked almost a year after my arrival to learn that at least one of the two founders had never entered the roof space of the building, something I found shocking considering the

objective of restoring the structure and grounds to a habitable state. During interviews conducted while attending some of the events held at the site, however, I found that those who came to stay accepted the pace of change and even saw the opportunity to be personally responsible for its incremental improvement as a positive.

During one class on cob plastering, Taka, a recent architecture graduate, was emphatic in the extent to which he compared being at the homestead favorably with his ongoing life in the city:

[In our urban lives] we're told to work, work, work. The older generation worked so we have to do the same. [Since coming here] I've realized there's more important things than promotion and just doing what I'm told... I want to start my own business where I can build houses for *people*, not just for money.

Taka's words here speak to several facets of his problematic relationship with his life as a member of Japan's younger, urban population. In a nation experiencing a "demographic crisis" in which the burden on the young to support the elderly is only increasing, maintaining the status quo has become an intimidating task. As competition for the most secure jobs has grown, the number of those failing to "make the cut" and instead falling into the status of the underemployed has risen. What is more, "moral panics" around phenomenon such as NEET, "parasite singles" and the aforementioned hikikomori, as well as the assumed second-class status of freeter,⁷⁹ all point to a state in which attaining economic and social capital is no easy task and failure to do so, for the middleclass at least, has an Othering effect (McCurry 2017). With political power concentrated in and thus catering to the older generations, there also seems to be little short-term prospect of those

⁷⁹ NEET is an acronym used to refer to those "Not in Education, Employment or Training," while "parasite singles" are unmarried adults who rely on their parents income to support themselves and "freeter" is a related term referring more emphatically to those who find work but limited to short term, part time positions.

most negatively affected by the current socio-economic situation gaining the agency necessary to counter it themselves. Under these conditions, reimagining flexible labor patterns as an opportunity to engage in ethical living becomes an attractive prospect.

If Taka were to take a job in the city, he elaborated, he also feared the extensive and exhausting education and training he had devoted himself to for more than a decade would be abstracted from any tangible sense of contribution to society. The Permaculture Homestead, in promoting smaller-scale endeavors conducted in collaboration with other likeminded individuals, provided the possibility of a radical contrast to this regime. Its egalitarian ethos and promotion of mutual though flexible responsibility (emphasized both in discourse and in structural practices as simple as sharing food and eating together) is particularly alluring because it meets normative expectations of group interdependence but with arbitrary authority reduced to a minimum. In this context, skill-based rather than tenure-based authority is given the chance to shine, allowing the acquisition of status and self-worth that might be denied within “traditional” working practices.

Despite his positive experience of the project, the impermanence of Taka’s relationship with the Permaculture Homestead shielded him from tensions that gradually developed after it was founded. In Japan, as is the case elsewhere (Escobar 1996), the close association of the rural with nature and “the natural” has become embedded in popular culture to the extent that the imaginations of urban residents grant it a romantic detachment from contemporary, “impure” urban realities. There is a tendency for rural areas to be conceived of as “timeless” and detached from the forces of globalization that are often regarded negatively, but for many long-term residents of rural areas this could not be further from the truth. In their eyes, it is globalization that is responsible for the economic decline that has given their home a “timeless” quality. As such, structural change capable of correcting this disparity becomes aspirational and not something to

be resisted. The sites at which the ideologies of the unchanging and the restructured rural meet, then, become sites of potential conflict.

With the population of Isumi consistently in decline, as well as that which remains steadily growing older, the arrival of the youthful long-term inhabitants of the homestead and the steady turnover of similarly aged temporary visitors did not go unnoticed (except, it seems, initially by me). Furthermore, age is not their only difference. Comprised of many individuals who have chosen to explore alternative lifestyles, the fashions sported at the homestead are often atypical and stand out as overly affected in the eyes of some long-term residents. The skepticism with which these differences were regarded was brought home to me when I went for drinks at a local bar with a strawberry farmer who lived adjacent to the fields bordering the homestead.⁸⁰

Well, to be honest, they don't really know what they're doing. You can't run any kind of business the way they do...They haven't properly cleared the land. The place looks a mess...They look like peasants...They were asked to cut back the grass around the gullies and they did it once but they haven't done it since...I really don't know what to make of them. It's like they want to live like bumpkins.

Even though this was an extreme response to the occupants of the homestead fueled by alcohol, I heard similar criticism from other local residents who viewed it in an equally cynical manner. The non-aggressive principles of the permaculture farming method had the effect of contrasting it sharply with the mechanized and input heavy approach of the majority of fulltime agriculturalists. By being “hands-off” and dispersing crop yields among vegetation left to contribute to ecological diversity, the norms of modern farming were being, in the eyes of more professionalized residents,

⁸⁰ He cultivated his strawberries on the land that had once contained his family farm in several warehouse-sized greenhouses some distance away and instead lived in a recently constructed mini apartment building.

contravened. What is more, tasks such as clearing overgrowth on neighbor-facing land were only reluctantly carried out due to an adherence to the permaculture method, something that gave the impression to many that they were disinterested in being good, “normal” neighbors. Clothing also became a source of discord, with the permaculturalists fashions seeming to apply a *bunmei* (“uncultured”) stereotype to rural residence that was not greatly appreciated. For both part-time and full-time farmers this undid the middleclass status that their industry had grown to acquire and cast the countryside in a manner that made it appear behind the times, as aspersion they and other Chiba residents have long resisted.

A further factor that had the effect of emphasizing the discordance of the homestead with local ambitions developed over the course of the two years I was in the field. With it being located in so close to one of the train stations that run the length of the coastline, it was also in the area that was experiencing the greatest degree of government subsidized agricultural rationalization. When the two founders had begun the project, the site had been surrounded by more than 12 individual paddies, the majority of which were being used to grow rice for animal feed and so experienced relatively little maintenance, growing “wild.” This rapidly changed when heavy machinery moved in and began consolidating fields in early 2017 in order to allow for fast and efficient planting and harvesting. Over the course of more than a year, aze were destroyed and land was stripped right on the doorstep of an effort to protect nature through sustainable, organic, and non-intensive farming. Not only did this cause resentment, it also physically and ideologically isolated the homestead and further emphasized its alienation from the surrounding community.

The fundamental issue here was that the interests of the permaculturalists in establishing an experimental approach towards agriculture contrasted with the agricultural practices of locals. For their neighbors, the focus was on efficiency, yield and maximizing the economic viability of their

businesses to survive. This divergence can be explained through the application of concepts of capital formulated by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 2010). The permaculturalists arrived in Isumi possessing cultural capital derived from their education and almost exclusive membership of wealthy families able to support them during the period of transition following their graduation from university. Residents of the countryside, on the other hand, despite their economic independence, retain a symbolic capital derived from their association with the historical 'peasantry.'⁸¹ This creates a situation where, for lack of other points of unity, value systems are judged against each other and the amalgamation of one party with the other is stunted. Thus, newcomers who had relocated to pursue new directions in their lives found they could not escape a mainstream inclination towards modernization projects that they themselves were ideologically opposed to. In attempting to achieve a better life a reality in which this dream appeared even less attainable was the outcome.

⁸¹ Far from implying Japanese farmers are 'peasant-like,' I instead mean this to connote a sense of self-assuredness that borders on intractability.



Image 11. An overview of the Permaculture Homestead and surrounding land in 2016 and 2018

Integrating into a community may, in some instances, require the adoption of the cultural practices and attitudes of the pre-existing residents. For the permaculturalists, as teachers of a particular way of being that contrasted markedly with that of the surrounding area, this is greatly hindered. What resulted was a not insubstantial degree of ambivalence felt towards the city and the inhabitants who had undermined the ambitions of the project. The result is a mutually felt tensions was that the two founders, though partially as a result of the necessities of their roles as ambassadors for permaculture, have retained hyphenated identities that situate them simultaneously as outsiders

and insiders. This bifurcation was also replicated in participants who went on to move to Isumi to settle. Newcomers would initially participate actively in a number of projects associated with the homestead and its users but soon find that the need to pursue freelance projects that occupied their time. This led to what they had once considered a leisure/work activity that instilled a confidence in them that their new way of life was better than their old becoming a hindrance in their ability to differentiate work from leisure. The changeability and impermanence of fellows attached to the project thus did little to dissuade suspicion and criticism of permaculture farming and lifestyle choices interpreted as inefficient, disorderly, or opposed to stability. What resulted was a recursive undermining of the fledgling lifestyle that the newcomers wished to adopt.

In order to avoid confronting a reality imbued with greater complexity, a predilection groups may subsequently develop is the formation of bonds exclusively with likeminded individuals rather than those within close physical proximity. Marginalization of these pockets of newcomers may then occur, and the holistic community aspired to by the local government, by filling areas of low population with newcomers fails to come about. Instead, a social network overlaying pre-existing social relations is the outcome, with these layers or 'strata' possessing alternative and conflicting ideologies. Within geology, strata are the layers of rock or soil that make up the Earth's surface, each with internally consistent characteristics that are distinguishable from subsequent layers. I use 'strata' as an analogy for those groups or 'layers' of people who possess a distinct habitus from those around them, both to highlight proximity without integration and due to geological strata frequently being used as a measure of time. These traits, I believe, are comparable to the way in which my informants' social networks lacked place-based interrelationships and how they were instead consistent with the relative lengths of time each group's members have been associated with the city as an imagined space. The established locals of Isumi form the base stratum and

associate their lifestyle with a historically contingent and thus ‘authentic’ subjectivity, while the upper stratum of newcomers arrive with a lifestyle that they associate with a rural identity, only one that is imbued with in a nostalgia for a time that has never been.

My concern regarding the implications of such stratification, is that the outcome will be a social landscape where integration becomes less likely and alienation becomes more likely, such as that between neighbors. Furthermore, a society in which purely interpretive qualities are held as important, like adherence to a specific ideology, could result in the notion of community becoming divorced from physical space, making integration contingent only on an increasingly narrow subjectivity. While this presents something of a pessimistic outlook, I wish to emphasize that my time in the field demonstrated to me that such an outcome is neither universal nor inevitable. In fact, by describing a further case of interaction between newcomers and locals that was more positive in terms of its demonstration of successful integration of both parties, I hope to demonstrate a means of overcoming stratification.

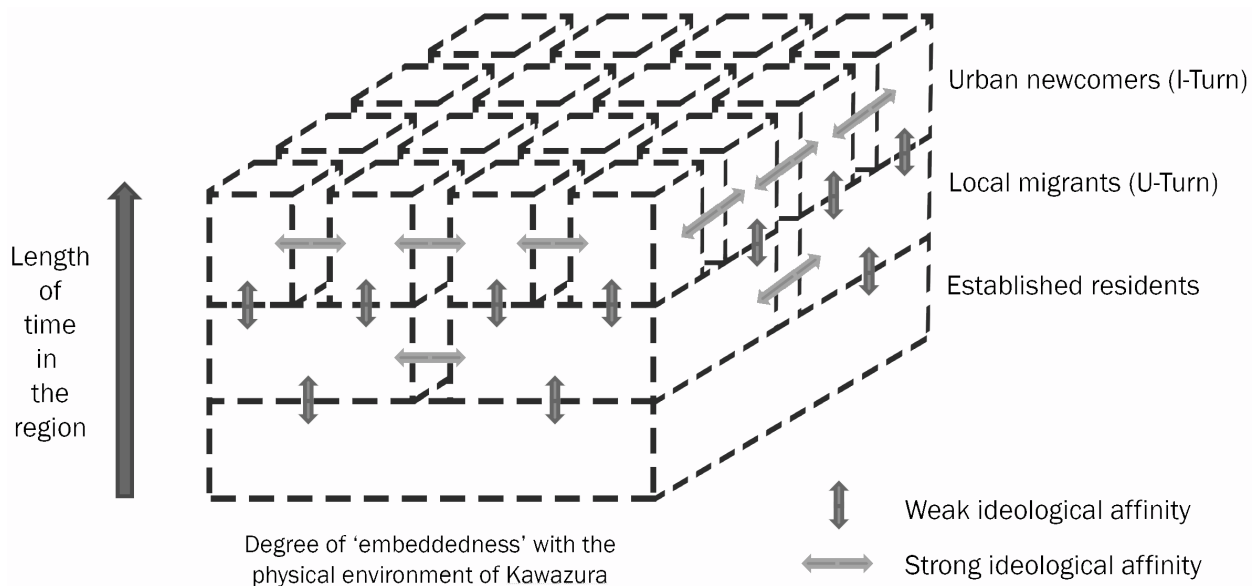


Table 3. Differential ideological affinity in shared space based on time in residence

Ōtani Farm

During my second spring in Isumi I came to know a rarity in Japan, a young farmer devoted to the profession fulltime. Born in what was then Isumi Town to a family that for two generations had run a small construction business, like so many others Ōtani-san had left the area following high school and chosen to pursue a career in Tokyo by training as an architect. A lifelong practitioner of aikido, a martial art that combines combat with a concern for maintaining harmony with nature, in his early 30s he had grown dissatisfied with his profession and developed a profound sense of disharmony (“*fuan na kanji*”). In a manner similar to Durkheim’s description of the alienation that followed the growth of urbanism in Britain during the Industrial Revolution (Durkheim 2005), he claimed social change in the country has occurred at a rate that society’s members may often be unable to adapt to. Counting himself among the number driven to escape this situation, he decided it was necessary to make a drastic change in his life course. Thus, inspired by the sights and training he experienced while a passenger on the Peace Boat,⁸² he became a “U-Turner” and returned to his hometown with the wife he had recently married and reinvented himself as an organic farmer-businessman capable of, in his words, “living with the land rather than off of it”.⁸³

In spite of the fact that his family owned an established business in Isumi, Ōtani-san’s transition into farming was not straightforward. His recently deceased father’s work in construction meant that he possessed a relatively large plot of land but this was given over entirely to buildings that had long held non-farming materials and machinery. As a result, he lacked any rice fields and

⁸² The Peace Boat is an environmental and humanitarian NGO based in Japan that conducts various aid and education-focused cruises. Paying passengers board one of several vessels on which seminars and conferences are held, combining the opportunity for training with voyages to locations afflicted by issues discussed onboard.

⁸³ “U-turners” are residents of the countryside who have returned after an extended period away. They differ from “I-turners” in that they possess pre-existing connections with the local area. As such, they are considered the most desirable of urban to rural migrants by municipal authorities (Hani 2001).

found himself in a similar position to almost all newcomers to Japanese agriculture, in that he was forced to rent from neighbors little inclined to sell. Ōtani-san, however, was not dissuaded by this inability to take complete ownership of his means of production and instead saw it as a way of becoming something of an educator. Throwing himself into cultivating fields owned by multiple people and distributed over a wide area, he hoped to demonstrate the benefits of organic farming to neighbors distributed over a wide area so that they man then themselves take up similar practices.

Several key ambitions governed Ōtani-san's approach to farming. These were related to me over the course of my time in Isumi, but especially during a period in which I worked directly with him as a result of my availability, my known interest in agriculture, and the shortness of hands he experienced when an assistant/apprentice of his broke a leg by being caught beneath a plow he was driving that tumbled into a rice field.⁸⁴ Firstly, Ōtani-san wished to farm without relying on the agricultural chemicals Japan has become dependent on (Shindo 2012). Secondly, to the best of his ability, he wished his family to participate in local exchange networks with likeminded farmers in order to live sustainably. Thirdly, he wanted to offer his products to whoever should desire to purchase them both as a commodity but also as a demonstration of the merits of an organic lifestyle. In this manner, Ōtani-san's approach took on a political dimension, but one heavily tempered by a staunch belief in a philosophy that had its roots in his aikido practice.

Ōtani-san made the relationship between his personal outlook regarding his agricultural profession and his aikido practice expressly clear to me one afternoon by comparing it to how he manages his relationships with those who might otherwise become confrontational neighbors. This

⁸⁴ The incident would likely have resulted in the apprentice's death had the paddy been flooded at the time, for the plow, which he had been driving, pinned him to the ground until he was rescued more than 30 minutes later.

he did by referencing a conversation we had had with a local farmer while explaining the technique he had used to almost leisurely throw me to the ground during a mock aikido bout:

You cannot just force your will upon your opponents. It is more effective to steer the energies of a person than to attempt to halt them outright and expend your own strength pushing the person in a direction they do not wish to go...Take that farmer we spoke with earlier today. His approach to *zanigani* (a non-native species of crawfish that now inhabit many of Japan's non-pesticide treated rice fields) damaging his seedlings will have always been to use chemicals to kill them off. If I tell him he shouldn't use pesticides because they're bad for the environment that won't end well. But if he sees me catching *zanigani* and selling them on for feed, he might then consider if there are other ways of doing things. That might then open many other new doors too.

Going further, he explained how aikido relies on the concept of *uke* ("to receive") and *tori* ("to take"). Perhaps counterintuitively, the one who initiates an attack is the 'receiver' of the technique, while the one defending is tasked with 'taking' the energy of the attack(er) by adjusting their own posture in such a way as to move their opponent into a position in which they are off balance, and thus rendered vulnerable by their own proactivity. This, Ōtani-san said, had been invaluable when his senior and often very direct neighbors had reprimanded him for his lack of conformity with the dominant farming practices of the area. As he put it, rather than argue back he would instead redouble his efforts in an attempt to turn these critics towards his own way of doing things. Later that week this approach did seem to have brought about something of victory. Ōtani-san happily revealed he had met the farmer we had spoken to again, who had admitted that he might forego pesticides the following season. Instead of crediting the prospect of capturing *zanigani*, however,

he noted that he had grown suspicious of the quality of the pesticides he was receiving owing to the verdancy of the fields planted by Ōtani-san that had grown up around his own.

Owing to younger generations of farmers having been disproportionately affected by the economic troubles Japan has faced during the last several decades, there exists a gulf between them and their seniors (Rosenberger 2013). This gulf lay between the likes of Matsuda-san and the permaculturalists, with neither party being interested in broaching it—Matsuda-san due to a lack of need and the permaculturalists due to a zealous belief in their own methods. Ōtani-san, partially by being a native of Isumi but also due to his non-overbearing attitude, has been able to adapt to his farming lifestyle in a manner that conforms with a diligent commitment to community integration and harmony. In sharing moral values with the wider organic food movement, he was able to form a productive relationship with the permaculturalists (with their first intake of resident “students” working on his farm) but without radically altering the norms of what a farmer in Isumi is assumed to be (a deferent member of the community).

Ōtani-san has also found success in the manner in which he has incorporated entrepreneurship into his approach to farming. His willingness to distribute his products online directly to buyers and to specialist food stores in Tokyo and his devotion to keeping his customers provisioned with a growing number of new items are both factors that have broadened his market and helped to establish his reputation outside of the city. This has, however, not been at the expense of the creation of local business relationships. In addition to producing several types of rice, crackers, noodles, and flour, during 2017 he partnered with a renowned Isumi brewery in order to release a sake (the very same that had encouraged Taka-san of the Takezumi Kenkyūkai to be so hospitable towards me). This level of collaboration encouraged the city to support the initiative and introduced him to larger commercial buyers. Conversely, for the brewery the association with

Ōtani farm provides a means of tapping into the organic food boom that has become a popular and lucrative market in Japan (Kondo 2015). In a prime example of postcommodity fetishism (Stanescu 2019),⁸⁵ the labor of producing the raw material for the sake is emphasized through the prominent association made between the end product and the rice grower (in this case Ōtani-san) to such an extent that the marketing material obfuscates the manufacturing process. In this manner the very commodification of the item is concealed.

Yet another method by which Ōtani-san has adopted an approach to farming that hybridizes the politics of the permaculturalists and the commercial interests of Matsuda-san is in his willingness to be subsumed by Isumi's wider objective of securing an identity as a high-quality food producer. Despite selling his organic rice from his own website for a higher price, Ōtani-san has collaborated in efforts to create a brand around local produce, specifically the city's creation of rice sold under the name Isumikko.⁸⁶ It is this willingness to develop new alliances that has allowed Ōtani-san to secure a name for himself despite the pressures that fall upon agricultural neophytes. This, in turn, has allowed him to act as an ambassador for the city as it attempts to encourage migration to the area, projecting a care for the principles that attract many to the countryside as an alternative to an urban existence and for those of the community that is already in place.

⁸⁵ While the classical idea of commodity fetishism conceals the labor of producing an item, "postcommodity" fetishism associated with the local food movement is alleged to conceal that one is purchasing a commodity at all.

⁸⁶ The addition of っこ ("kko") to Isumi in the name has the effect of conveying that it is a representative of the place in a playful manner. For example, people from Tokyo are occasionally referred to as 江戸っ子 ("Edokko") as a means of implying that they are carriers of the characteristics that truly define the historical traits associated with somebody born and raised in the city. For Isumi brand rice, the rendering of the word in hiragana is logical owing to Isumi now being officially written in the phonetic script.



Image 12. Isumikko: Specially Cultivated Rice Made in Isumi City, Chiba, Japan

In spite of his successes, the experiences of Ōtani-san have not been altogether positive. Most tellingly, one afternoon just after we had spent six hours engaged in planting and the repair of an aze that had been heavily damaged by being trampled by wild boar, he did express exhaustion (I was myself exhausted but more physically than existentially) and an envy for those such as the permaculturalists who have put “communality” above community. The simple fact of the matter was that in order to maintain the high bar he had set in producing such a quantity and range of foodstuffs delivered to such a multitude of parties by various means, he was working himself almost to breaking point. As a husband and father to a child he adhered to the normative conception of the contemporary Japanese nuclear family but in so doing while adhering to older, non-industrialized methods of production he bore a much greater weight of responsibility on his

shoulders. For the permaculturalists, the commune-like characteristics of their operation meant that responsibility and labor (as well as the risk of failure) is shared among a great number of individuals, while in Matsuda-san's case he is able to rely on the size and scale of his farm to secure cheap foreign labor when it is necessary. At times, Ōtani-san was dogged by a concern about whether or not he could continue and if his ambition to demonstrate to others the viability of his lifestyle and philosophy might instead prove to become evidence of its impracticality. Despite often receiving help from various parties who found their way to Isumi in pursuit of an organic lifestyle, the incident that resulted in my working with him, in which his assistant-cum-apprentice had been catapulted into a field due to harshly engaging the breaks of a rice planter that subsequently followed him in and crushed his leg, seemed to provoke concern for the risk he was taking in making his own way.

I had been working with him for several weeks, having by then completed the season's planting and moved on to the more tedious job of clearing weeds around the rice seedlings in often high heat and strong sunshine, when I arrived one morning to find Ōtani-san much more down in spirit than usual. After explaining what we were to do that day, he and I started work by beginning the process of clearing one of his barns, which just happened to contain, among much else, the damaged remains of the planter that had crushed his assistant's leg. Apparently, somebody was coming to photograph the farm for a flyer that the city would be distributing as part of its initiative to entice Tokyoites to move to Isumi and support its farming industry. After about 30 minutes of carrying the accumulated items from the open-faced structure and placing them in a pile to be discarded later, Ōtani-san asked me in a subdued voice "Max-san, why do you think it is that the 'Bamboo Charcoal Society' is so popular?"

It was perhaps the recent and overt recognition received by the Takezumi Kenkyūkai that prompted Ōtani-san to question my thoughts on why they might have become so successful, combined with his reflection on the state of his personal project of establishing a more holistically beneficial agriculture practice (caused, in this instance, by his needing to prepare for a photo that would have the purpose of encapsulating it). I was initially shocked by the question as he, of all the people I met during my time in Japan, was the last I would expect to be capable of, and much less express, any inkling of jealousy at the relative success of others. Rather, as we spoke and I suggested reasons that might account for the society's success (a larger network of local and non-local associates because of the leadership being greater in number, the relative 'newness' of their activities, as well as the undeniable allure of starting fires in forested areas during all seasons, for example), I was shocked to realize that Ōtani-san seemed to be having a crisis in confidence.

The following day Ōtani-san seemed to have put the rigors of his lifestyle behind him. It transpired that the photoshoot has led him to survey what he had accomplished so far and the responsibility he held to the many parties who had expressed a belief in him. Counted among these were not only his immediate family and friends, but also the supra-local community of organic farmers who act as a source of support. Even though supplying his foodstuffs to multiple parties along a variety of channels spread him thin, it was owing to this network that he was able to ensure he had a viable business. Acknowledging the risk he was taking and the exertion his work required, he expressed with a mixture of determination and black humor that he'd work for the sake of his original ambitions until he no fat left on him. Comparing himself to part-time farmers, he noted that his burdens came not without advantages. In uncertain economic times he had plenty of work and did not have to entertain the idea of breaking up his family's landholding and being the custodian of the ie whose actions marked its decline. Quite the opposite, his commitment to

expansion meant that if, eventually, land was sold or turned over to him his labors today would grant him a tangible resource that set him apart. In terms of self-sufficiency, he was moving in the right direction and through that creating for himself a sense of security that outweighed any uncertainty that occasionally crept into his mindset.

The strategies of diversification in both his businesses practices and his social engagement with his fellows represent a middle ground between the intensification of agricultural practices by Matsuda-san and the cloistering approach of the permaculture homesteaders. While where the destination his path will lead him is uncertain, the overall trajectory of Ōtani-san's participation in farming is open, reflexive and responsible in a manner that allows him to adapt to uncertainty and employ novel approaches to ensuring his own and his profession's sustainability. Similar to organic farmers who faced disruption in the aftermath of the radiation leak that afflicted Fukushima in the wake of the 3/11 disasters, he and his family's ethical commitment to food and an integrative localism provide a source of hope that there remains in Japan those that possess the desire and ability to ensure ecological and cultural survival (Rosenberger 2016).

Conclusion

The establishment of Isumi in 2005 joined not only three territories but also a multitude of people engaged in markedly different approaches to an industry that, even within it, contains the capacity for great variation (wet-rice agriculture, dry-grain farming, vegetable production, animal husbandry, etc.). In spite of this diversity, thanks to the adoption of both innovative methods of perpetuating livelihoods and engagement with both sides of ideological divides that separate practitioners, businesses are emerging that are able to establish ongoing farming livelihoods. These are livelihoods, such as in Ōtani-san's case, that may now be capable of being maintained by their

practitioners in a self-sufficient manner and further cultivated among newcomers by local political bodies and non-local support networks alike.

Many of the non-local networks that have integrated with farming initiatives in Isumi have a national or international presence that facilitates the spread of knowledge of their successes far and wide, creating the potential for an iterative development of practices that far exceed those usually attributed to U and I-Turners or seasonal visitors (of which the city has many) (Janoschka 2009:253). This factor renders the combined efforts of those involved in novel farming practices a creative process in which not only is a profession remade but, through social action, a city itself created. On visiting the offices of the NPO Iraken one afternoon, a local business owner commented that when newcomers visit the city for activities like a *nōgyō taiken* (“farming experience”), they’ll see many sites and locations distributed across what were once distinct towns and villages. Yet now, when they leave, they’ll carry with them the sense that these are all a part of the fledgling Isumi City. Greater understanding among locals that this could be a source of vitality and even possibly pride does remain an aspiration but one granted great import, especially by those involved in municipal governance tasked with managing the city from above while simultaneously appreciating it from ground level. Even if population data demonstrates that the marketing of Isumi to potential migrants is not being successful, that does not mean that it makes no contribution to the quality of life of its residents or does nothing to lend the city greater self-determination in the eyes of outsiders.

Regarding the relationships between those practices farming methodologies like those of the Matsudas and the Permaculture Homesteaders, rather than remaining sites of conflict one hopes that means of achieving more convivial coexistence will emerge with time. Japan is a country in which reciprocity is deeply embedded in neighborly interaction, so where difficulties lie between

two parties there are also opportunities for beneficent intervention. Should mediation prove to be the beginnings of social interactions that establish reciprocity, we might yet find integration rather than isolation remains on the table.

Afterward

Towards the end of my and my family's stay in Isumi, the four of us (my son having been born some months prior) attended the city's annual Children's Festival. Held in the former Ōhara Culture Center, the festival was one of the most well-attended that I participated in and drew a large number of local families, some non-local visitors and even the sole pair of Mormon missionaries I saw throughout my entire time in rural Chiba. The headline event of the festival was a play put on by a local drama troupe made up of students of the nearby high school and several adult volunteers. Staged with the goal of instilling in the city's children knowledge of their home's past while exposing them to morality tales recounted through the lives and experiences of historical residents, the play's narrative followed a teenage time traveler who meets three of her and the city's forefathers.⁸⁷

The most recent of the three tales was a brief biography of an engineer who played a major role in the arrival of the first trainline linking Isumi District with Tokyo at the conclusion of the 19th century. Though this tale was fascinating, it was the remaining two stories that held particular interest for me. Both featuring inhabitants embroiled in events connected with the farming industry, one recounted the life of Tamajirō, a local responsible for the construction of the first sluice gate built to prevent salt water from contaminating the irrigation systems responsible for feeding the bay's coastal rice fields—who in the process became a paragon of virtue for his developmentalist streak; and that of Mokuemon, a historical headman who in 1750 ventured to the capital during a time of famine in order to request a tax reprieve from the region's *daimyo* (feudal lord). On reflecting on their contents after witnessing the play, the outcomes of these two stories both

⁸⁷ The protagonists of each story were exclusively male and the modern-day time traveler was female, a demonstration of both historical gender biases and modern attempts to counter them.

conform and contrast with the contemporary reality of Isumi and its approach to redefining itself as a city while maintaining its role as a rural farming community.

The admiration for the accomplishments of Tamajirō, a landowner whose principal motivation for acting was the expansion of his own workable land, mirrors the manner in which entrepreneurship is now considered vital for the development of Isumi and entertained as an experimental endeavor. In this way, the successes of Matsuda-san and Ōtani-san, as well as initiatives such as those of the Takezumi Kenkyūkai, win political backing and popular praise for their self-led character and ability to find a market that integrates Isumi with the economic and political center of Tokyo (the trainline engineer does this quite literally). Together with Mokuemon, Tamajirō's adulation in a public forum such as the Children's Festival, prominently attended as it is by the mayor and other local politicians, also emphatically demonstrates that agriculture is considered to have continued importance for to the region and the need for devotion and self-sacrifice among its practitioners. As the city's past is being defined by the importance of farming, this sector projected into its future as integral aspect of its character. The conclusion of the Mokuemon story, however, does point to a contemporary redistribution of the responsibility for self-sacrifice that was taken on by these two protagonists.

On his arrival in the capital, Mokuemon met with his lord and requested on behalf of the farming communities of which he was headman a respite from the year's taxes paid for in grain. The response to Mokuemon's request, in spite of his long and arduous journey and the background to his plea, was not sympathy but instead flat-out refusal combined with his immediate beheading for having had the insolence to ask such a thing. This brutal death far from home was not the end of the story, however, as the Tokugawa Shogun was displeased to learn of the heartlessness and brutality of one of his subordinates. He made this clear by his removal of the lord from his position

and the instatement of a year's reprieve from taxes owed by the villagers of Mokuemon's district. So, despite his death and not himself being a farmer, Mokuemon was lauded as noble soul who had given his life so that his people might have a chance to stave off either starvation or the retribution cast upon those who failed to pay their taxes.⁸⁸

The ingrained social hierarchy and indeed the paternalism that led Mokuemon, a politician, to make a dangerous plea on behalf of the farmers of his district, to take on the responsibility for ensuring their livelihood and the possible expense of his own life, may no longer persist in Isumi today. The farmers with whom I worked and lived possess a more cynical opinion of the local political figures and indeed the bureaucracy that operates between them. For some, such as the older gentlemen who protested the laissez-faire attitude of the official sent to observe the discussion of what might be done to bring life back to Isumi's highstreets, those who work the land have nowhere to turn but to their own ingenuity in order to survive. The renovation of the physical villages and the farmland itself is left predominantly to the likes of the Takezumi Kenkyūkai, a non-political organization. Empty homes remain, with few children remaining locally to fill them and an ongoing dearth of new blood to reinhabit them. Many officials understand that for those in inland portions of the city's borders, rebuilding the countryside is a romantic ideal. In reality, it will be necessary to remake the countryside with what remains, borrowing from the strategies that become popular among urban migrants but never with an expectation that they will attain the stability of a pastoral past that they seek to invoke. Although recent local administrative policy continues to emphasize rejuvenation as a goal, Isumi is now in the process of an urbanization in which farming and agriculture are rationalized where it can be carried out efficiently and allowed to persist largely as a simulacrum of the rural idyll where it

⁸⁸ A memorial tower to Mokuemon still stands at Bansui Temple on the outskirts of Ōhara.

cannot. The city headmen of today though remain aloof, as Isumi presents an example of bottom-up participation in the maintenance of vitality and the remaking of rural Japan.

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