



島 Shima

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SPIRITS OF TSURESHIMA

Creative storytelling with islanders

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ABSTRACT: Folk songs in Okinawa include chants about belief in female spirits returning from the eastern sea. Artists working creatively with islanders convey these spirits in creative ways. This article focuses on islands on the Pacific side of Okinawa, where historical ports facilitate maritime exchange. Rituals were regularly performed on these islands at the entrance to the Nakagusuku Bay by priestesses to protect the community and the Ryūkyū Kingdom. Prohibitions against local rituals were imposed on the Okinawan islands starting in the 17th Century and depopulation is currently threatening the transmission of priestesses' rituals to the next generation. However, islanders' resilience has kept spirits alive while artists who work intimately with residents tell stories through creative media. Together with islanders the author created the artwork *Sea Birth* (2017) composed of stories of interconnection between islands that are often seen separately. For example, the author engaged with residents of Tsuken and Kudaka islands, which were historically *Tsureshima*, a term that refers to the islands in company. Through artworks such as this, spirits of interconnectivity at risk of disappearing are kept alive and passed along to others. Creative storytelling is a method of empowering island communities to form alternative visions for the future in ways that resist the homogeneity of dominant cultures.

KEYWORDS: Art, Storytelling, Okinawa, Sea, Spirits

Introduction

This article focuses on spirits residing in the sea¹ in Okinawa seen from the viewpoint of artists along with island residents. The method for this article is one of practice-based research that emerges as contemporary artists (including the author²) are making creative work about sea spirits. This research method works with relics, songs and stories encountered in the process of making artworks as sites for deeper reflection in the field of Island Studies. Artists' works discussed here share the aim to create "not a narrative about islanders, but with them" (Baldacchino, 2008: 49); further expanding upon socially engaged

¹ "Sea spirits" are referred to differently in various parts of Okinawa, for example in Nago and the surrounding islands in North Okinawa they are referred to as *ungami*, *unzami*, *ungyami* depending on the locale.

² For more background on the author's artworks please see <www.jamesjack.org>. Works by the artist that are focused on island histories include *Sunset House: The House as Language of Being* (2010) on Shodoshima and *Stories of Khayalan Island* (2014) as well as those mentioned in this article.

art methods “attentive to the specific audiences involved in a work” (Jesty, 2017: online). Islanders are not the subject of this research, they are active participants who co-create “islands for life” (Favell, 2017) as places for where alternative visions of life are nurtured from “what is already there” in the islands (Jack, 2017). This article draws upon discoveries made undersea to where past maritime links are visited in the present. This builds upon the “expanded project” of research into the interaction between land and marine environments (Hayward, 2012). The complexity of underwater space is opened together with islanders to tell stories in creative ways.

Okinawa has been an abundant center for cultural exchanges. Written records show it as an independent kingdom from at least the 12th Century (Hokama, 1972) and archaeological history of inhabitation in the islands goes much earlier. The islands were coveted by Japan since the 17th Century for their vast trade network in Asia Pacific (Smits, 2000: 91). Scholarship has focused on the west side of Okinawa for its strong ties with China, but the Ryūkyū kingdom had strong ties with Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Sumatra, Java and other cultures in Asia Pacific (Sakihara, 1987: 135). Furthermore, the Pacific side of Okinawa Island Ha “the most sacred groves connected with the creation of Okinawa and the introduction and cultivation of grains such as rice, wheat, and millet are located there” (ibid: 119; same trend noted in Hokama, 1998: 175-6). From the perspective of ships, one particularly accessible maritime space on the Pacific side of Okinawa is Nakagusuku Bay. The spiritual origin of Okinawa is believed to have come from one island on the east side, as retold by an artist:

Amamiya (female) and shiramikyo (male) deities came to Kudaka Island from beyond the eastern sea (nirāharā, also called nirai kanai in other parts of Okinawa). There the eastern waves surpassed those in the west, and the western waves surpassed those in the east, swaying to and fro inside the ocean. Amamiya asked the deities from beyond and received soil, stones, grass and trees from the sky. This is how Kudaka Island was born. (Higa, 2000: 29, author’s translation)

At the southern tip of the Nakagusuku Bay, Kudaka Island offered a safe entry point for ships when wind patterns and sea currents had a large impact on migration of people in these islands.³ On the north tip of the bay lies Tsuken Island, the other half of the entrance through which ships would enter. Now what memories lie in the sea at the entrance to the Bay? First I will start with primary experience of maritime passages as an American artist with a background in Japanese studies, followed by examples of other artists who have made work on spirits in Okinawa, then I conclude with reflections on the empowering potential of creative storytelling together with islanders.

A Maritime Encounter with Okinawa

The first time I went to Okinawa, I spent four days at sea and one day on land. I embarked on a ship from the island of Shikoku at night and changed ships in Kobe before spending two days at sea. After spending time with relatives for a few days on Tokunoshima and then changing to a new ferry ship, the island of Okinawa arose on the horizon just before sunset

³This observation of prevalent wind patterns in the Ryūkyū islands is based on a discussion with archaeologist Akito Shinzato in January 2015 at Issen Historical Folklore Center, Tokunoshima, Kagoshima Prefecture, Japan.

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on the fourth day at sea. The ferry hugged the western shore of the main island, the most common route now taken by ships powered by motor as it is protected from the Pacific winds. All the way along this maritime journey, I observed the subtle changes on the ocean's surface while carrying a gift. It was a botanical gift kindly given to me by an auntie working in an historic garden on Shikoku Island. The aim of my journey was to revisit the maritime exchange route whereby a *sotetsu* (*Cycas revoluta*) tree had been given by one clan to another in the 17th Century. Since then it has proliferated into a grove of *sotetsu* trees in a garden in Shikoku, where my journey had commenced. Originally found in the Ryūkyū islands, *sotetsu* is now found on many islands in Japan, as a decorative tree in gardens, temples and domestic settings. As a tree that has been used as a food source and wind barrier, it holds a significant place in the cultural heritage of the Ryūkyū Islands (Hayward and Kuwahara, 2012) and inspires works by artists (Miyamoto, 2014).

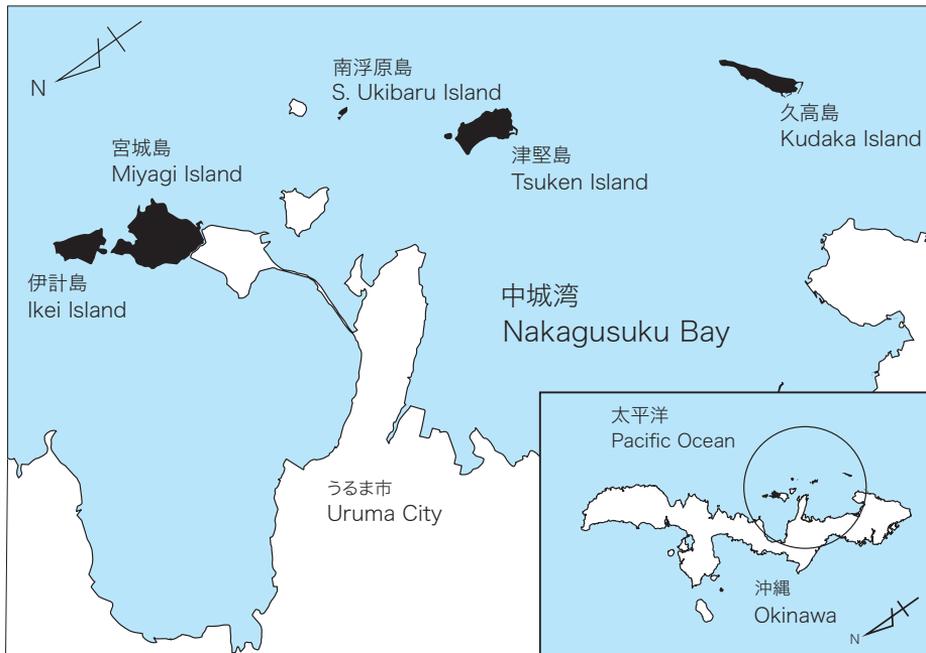


Figure 1 – Map of Nakagusuku Bay and Okinawa represented from the perspective of a ship entering from the Pacific Ocean (map design by Kaz Ikeura).

This maritime voyage was made in reverse of the southbound route established by the Satsuma Domain circa 1609, when resources were first extracted from the Ryūkyū Kingdom (Sakihara, 1972). Among the most aggressive clans of the Satsuma were the Shimazu, who took valuable resources from the southern islands to amass great wealth. In their ships returning northward, they carried exotic gifts from the islands, including *sotetsu*. They gave young *sotetsu* trees to their trading partners, including the Matsudaira Clan of Shikoku in Takamatsu. In the past sugar cane, *shōchū* liquor, rice and other products were taken from the south and brought to the north (Ryū, 2012). For this artwork, I imagined those items that might have been carried in the opposite direction as gifts for those in Ryūkyū. This gift revives the maritime route not as one of extraction but rather one of mutual exchange between individual people living on different islands. The artwork

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consisted of an installation of images of the sea taken aboard the ships affixed to the floor to be walked on. At the entrance was a drawing of the *sotetsu* tree carried three centuries ago and at the end was a drawing of the black pine sapling that I carried. During the production of this work, I spent more time on a ship than on land in Okinawa, so I was left with the memory of a sea of possibilities.



Figure 2 - James Jack *Migration of a Cycad* 2015 Handmade walnut ink on paper and digital inkjet prints mounted on floor at Shōkōshōreikan historic site, Ritsurin Garden, Takamatsu, Japan 76 x 56 cm & variable dimensions (installation view *Complex Topographies: The Garden* exhibit) (photo by Shintaro Miyawaki).

While listening, a mutual understanding can form in relationship with another. The work *Migration of a Cycad* began by listening to workers in the historical garden and wondering about the other side of the story. More recently, while searching for stories of a Scottish ancestor of mine who worked as a scribe for a maritime vessel in the 19th Century, I heard of a European ship that had run aground on the islands outside of Nakagusuku Bay in the same period. Discovering threads of connectivity between the islanders and myself is like assembling parts of a ceramic plate that have been separated in the ocean over time. At first, they appear disparate. One by one clues such as a blue line, the shape of a crack or a tone of white become the key to making connection. Artworks are born from these relationships. The creative process of artists can revive practices from the past in ways that are relevant to the present. Participants in my work on an island in Hiroshima Prefecture observed open relationships between islanders as well as other visitors at the site of artwork production by the harbour.⁴ This open air was intentionally a central part of

⁴ A description of the artwork production site, “Jack engaged the enthusiastic participation and advice of one energetic villager around 60... who could provide the key relations Jack needed in order to obtain the recycled wood, as well as expertise (to build a boat). Other curious villagers could drop by the open site during the day; there were school visits, newspaper coverage, and parties to mark the

the artwork. In this process, dialogue with others comes before and after materials. Before reflecting more on my artistic process, a review of previous artists' work in Okinawa will inform this topic.

Artists' Views of Spirits

A number of Japanese scholars and some artists have been obsessed with Okinawan folklore. However, the obsession is not diverse. For example, a library search reveals over two hundred books on Kudaka Island,⁵ and zero on Tsuken Island. The archive at the community center on Kudaka displays just under one hundred books on the island. Of those books, analysis shows that more than half are about spiritualism, one-fourth more generally on Okinawa (with mention of Kudaka), while only four are devoted entirely to Kudaka Island itself. Islands that are not well documented in folklore, art and literature are also rich in stories and culture. A scholar of Okinawa since the 1970s, Beillevaire noted that folklore studies in Japan are part of a "national cause" that aims to establish "cultural and social markers of singularity" (2012: 2). Narratives of Japanese uniqueness are also part of homogeneous agendas. Creative perspectives also take on an essentialist approach to islands. For example, artist Okamoto Tarō's *Wasurerareta Nihon* (1961) concerns Kudaka Island as a source for what was being lost in Japan during the US occupation.⁶

Literature and art often fantasise about islands. For example, the novel *Island* (Huxley, 1962) paints an island of utopia that has not been touched by colonialism, overpopulation or rampant consumerism. That is why this story elevates Eastern philosophy over Western modernism, an attractive place yet the problem with this fantasy lies in the feeling that the island is far away. Inhabited islands are not free from human suffering. This article takes an approach shared with researchers and artists who include themselves in the sociopolitical realities of islands today (Dvorak, 2011), acknowledging their personal relationship with changing social circumstances (Higa, 2000). To glimpse at these social circumstances, deep listening to others is combined with critical self-reflection. I have found spending five hours with a descendant of a plantation owner's family as she recalls working in pineapple fields and another five hours walking with a caretaker who has been looking after the fisheries for his whole life shifts distancing artistic fantasies toward the realities of how islanders see islands. Oral transmission of these perspectives is a crucial part of decolonising the mind (Pennybacker, 1999: online) and reviving stories today.

One of the earliest compilations of orally transmitted stories in Ryūkyū is the collection of songs known as the *Omoro sōshi*.⁷ In the *Omoro*, volumes one, three, four and six refer

project's launch and completion during an extended slow summer. In the evenings, the panoramic spot became an open-air forum of evening drinks and discussion" (Favell, 2016: 115-116).

⁵ For readers of Japanese there is an abundance of literature on the spiritual rituals of Kudaka by folklore scholars including Tanigawa Kenichi, Chikanaga Yūto, Higa Masao and Sakurai Tokutarō.

⁶ Though primarily known for his paintings and sculptures, Okamoto was also an amateur folklorist. His book on Okinawa was originally published during the U.S. military occupation, and re-published in 1972, the same year the islands were returned to the Japan. This was a time of great hope for the Okinawan people to regain control for the future of their islands. For multiple perspectives on the 'Japanisation' of the Okinawan islands after they were returned from the US see Yoshimi (ed) (2015).

⁷ The *Omoro sōshi* is a collection of songs compiled in the 16th-17th centuries in an effort to record poems primarily from the 12th-16th centuries that originated in the 5th-6th centuries (Hokama 1972: 58). Records of these songs were destroyed, so what remain now are recollections by scholars from the

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frequently to the importance of *noro*, or priestesses.⁸ In these songs, *noro* are specifically mentioned on the islands of Kudaka, Tsuken, Ikei, Miyagi and others. Their importance to the kingdom for performing rituals throughout the year to protect the king in Shūri is also indicated. Prayers made toward the east by royalty of Shuri are recorded in these songs, such as this one that mentions their powers of protection:

OMORO 893

*Eagle-fish of the east
flying fish leaping eastward
surely female god-shamans protecting us
let us be at peace, protected
eagle-fish of the sun-birthing hole* (Drake, 2011: 56)

There were priestesses on most if not all of the inhabited islands at the entrance to Nakagusuku Bay who protected the livelihood of islanders.

In these songs (as well as modern creative retellings to be discussed later), islands were sometimes referred to in tandem, indicating their interconnected existence. For example, in the *Omoro*, the term *Tsureshima* was used to refer to Kudaka and Tsuken Islands “in company” (Sakihara, 1987: 118).⁹ This was linked to the pathway for the earliest passage of spirits at the tip of the Chinen and Katsuren peninsulas, extending into the sea. Here *Tsureshima* provided a natural breakwater for ships entering the harbour against wind and waves, conditions that did not exist on the west coast of Okinawa (Sakihara, 1987: 129). The shift from maritime to land travel has increased the distance between the islands today; although a mere ten kilometres separate these islands by boat, by land, accessing these islands by land requires a 44-kilometer journey. The space between Tsuken and Kudaka seems to have drifted apart over the centuries. Links between the islands have grown faint in daily life, yet they remain alive in modern songs that the islanders are proud to sing.¹⁰ Scholars have noted that the Ryūkyū Islands had a strong affinity with other islands in Asia Pacific in theories such as ‘Japonesia’ (Shimao, 1977) and more recently ‘Archipelago Theory’ (Imafuku, 2006). Despite these interconnections in the memories of elderly residents from the island community, there are doubts as how these memories will be passed on to the next generation.

Artists inspired by spirits create work that passes these memories on to others. After witnessing rituals by *noro* on the island of Kudaka, writer Ōshiro Tatsuhiko (1925-) kept hearing the chants repeating in his ears. When these rituals were put on hold in 1978 due to the lack of priestesses on the island, he heard these chants in his head reminding him that the spirits were still alive. These voices inspired him to write a play based on the spirits that

early 18th century (Smits, 2000: 92-93). For this article, the author relied on the primary text of Hokama (1972/2000) and interpretations by Sakihara (1987).

⁸ This is according to Hokama (1972).

⁹ The boundaries of *tsureshima* are not agreed upon by scholars and island residents. Sakihara (1987) emphasises the term *tsureshima* as one indicating “company” between Tsuken and Hokama (1972) states that this term simply refers to the island of Tsuken. A nearby comparison can be made with the term *Ichihanari* which was historically said to refer to both Ikei and Miyagi Islands as a pair, but is now claimed by residents on Ikei to refer to their island individually (Ishikawa, 2017).

¹⁰ Interview with Seiki Tamashiro, Tsuken Island private residence, 19th September 2017. A selection of this interview is included in the video installation *Sea Birth: part one* (2017).

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he encountered on Kudaka. In one scene from this play, entitled *Umi no tinzakai* ('Gods Beyond the Sea'), the spirit of the prince returns to explain why he disappeared:

*I am the spirit of Shō Toku, King of Shuri.
Having fallen into Kanamaru's snare,
I escaped Shuri Castle and set sail to Kudaka.
But, alas, I shipwrecked and died on my way here.
Though I am now a spirit, the fate of Kunikasa
Weighs heavily on my heart,
And thus I have come to Kudaka Island.
Oh, Kunikasa, hear my lament.
Rise and let us go to the other world,
To Umi nu Tinzakai—the world beyond the horizon. (Ōshiro, 2011: 81)*

Shō Toku, mentioned in the beginning of this passage, is said to have traveled to Kudaka once a year to receive the blessing of priestesses. On the way to Kudaka there are shoals where it is easy to imagine a shipwreck occurring. The songs about priestesses were not limited to Kudaka, they included nearby islands of Ikei and Miyagi (see Figure 1),¹¹ and there was a time when priestesses lived in each and every town playing a vital role in the life of the community (Shiraho, 2012: 47). Spiritual rituals were performed by priestesses at least once a month, sometimes more. Commencing in the 17th Century, Satsuma invaders from Kagoshima prohibited these rituals in acts passed in 1673, 1732, 1831 and 1900 and gave rewards to anyone who reported them to the authorities in 1938 (Negishi, 2000). Along with these prohibitions, deities from the Shinto pantheon have been actively used to replace the local *Amamiko* and *Shinireku* deities from Ryūkyūan beliefs. This replacement serves to facilitate the “naturalization” of the Okinawan islands as part of the nation-state of Japan (Loo, 2009).

Photographer Yasuo Higa (1938-2000) directly engaged with priestesses and the rituals that had been prohibited by Japan. Higa visited Kudaka Island over one hundred times during the last twenty-five years of his life and established a close relationship with the senior priestess Nishime Shizu. He witnessed rituals all year-round, including *Izaihō*, sacred practices held once every twelve years. Based on the intimate relationships he established with the islanders, he was invited into the most sacred grove where spiritual practices were performed by priestesses. Rituals conducted during the four-days of *Izaihō* invited ancestral spirits to return home to sacred spaces on the island: “It is said on Kudaka Island, when women and men die, their spirits go once to *nirai kanai*, but only *miko* (shamanesses) go home again to Kudaka, each returned to their own *taki* (sacred forest), to protect the island.” (Higa, 1979: 11). During the one-month long preparations and the rituals themselves, women between the ages of 30-41 are transformed into *noro*, or priestesses. Higa's sensitive photographs from Kudaka were first published in the collection *Maternal Spirits* (1979) that was extended into a series of twelve volumes, including spiritual practices on other islands including Miyakō, Ishigaki and Amami-Ōshima published

¹¹ These stories of *noro*, priestesses come from oral interviews conducted with Shinya Sueko a resident of Tsuken Island, on September 9th 2017, Matsumoto Morikazu, whose family has run a boat ferry business for generations on Hamahiga Island, on November 2nd 2017 and Shinzato Seiki a former resident of the now uninhabited Ukibaru Island (currently utilised by the Japanese self-defense forces and the US military as a helicopter landing practice site), on September 12th 2017).

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between 1989-1993. Fortuitously, this was the same period when *Izaihō* was put on hold due to the lack of young women to be inducted as priestesses.¹²



Figure 3 - Yasuo Higa Hokama Priestess and *umēgi* make crowns by lashing bundles of *tōsurumodoki* plants on rocks ('Habui no taba wo iwa ni tataki tsukeru hokama noro to *umēgi*'), silver gelatin photograph, 1979.

Higa's photographs kept these spirits alive amidst the uncertain future of the rituals. On many of his early trips to the island, he brought along folklore scholar Kenichi Tanigawa who meticulously documented rituals, spiritual terms, songs and beliefs on Kudaka. His commentary published alongside Higa's photographs in *Maternal Spirits*, tell of the meaning and significance of the rituals in the islanders' dialect. In the face of depopulation and uncertainty, Higa's grainy black and white images came to life with detailed descriptions of shamanic rituals. The significance of Higa's photographs lies not only in the act of recording, which many others attempted at the time, but rather in the intimacy Higa shared with the islanders. His deep respect for preserving their worldview is evidenced in photographs where the priestesses engaged in daily tasks alongside the rituals themselves. In one image, two women lash bundles of *tōzurudoki* (*Flagellaria indica*) plants on stones near the sea while to prepare the crowns they adorn during shamanic rituals. This photograph is taken in a way so that the women appear as one with the plants, laboring harmoniously with the sea spirits.

In another dark photograph, a coral stonewall stands firmly behind a line of *fukugi* (*Garcinia*) trees. A domestic residence becomes the main subject of a visual poem. What

¹² The *Izaihō* rituals that were to be held in 1990 were put on hold due to the lack of young women to be inducted as a *noro*. Local custom requires women to be born on Kudaka, married to a man born on Kudaka and bear children in order to participate in *Izaihō*.

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have these trees witnessed along the street? What lies in between the stones and the tree trunks? This composition reveals a spiritual world inside of the minutiae of the village. Higa's work retains the life of discontinued rituals in the form of art. Since he passed away *Izaihō* has been canceled two more times in 2002 and 2014. There is now local concern that there will soon be no more living senior priestesses with primary experience of the rituals who can train new priestesses.



Figure 4- Yasuo Higa *Fukugi no yashikigaki* ('Domestic Wall of Garcinia'), silver gelatin photograph, 1979.

Nonetheless, a new generation of creative thinkers is working with island spirits in new ways. Filmmaker Hikaru Hokama (1988-) made a film entitled *Izaihō no zanshō* ('Afterglow of *Izaihō*') while staying at his grandfather's home on Kudaka. He chose to focus on the contemporary life of people on the island while filming sites where he felt contradictions and tension. Rather than filming women adorned in white clothes while performing rituals, he filmed them in ordinary apparel to shed light on daily life. He states, "Rituals are an everyday fact of life. I feel even amidst modernisation the power of spirits is not being lost" (Unattributed, 2015; online). However, the footage he took at construction sites and other transitional places on the way to Kudaka were edited out of the final version by the tourist office producing the film. For him, art weaves contemporary issues traditional rituals in complex ways. Rather than merely making a documentary about the 'afterglow' of the *Izaihō* rituals on Kudaka, he was more interested in the daily life of the island where his forebears grew up. Therefore after the first screening of the film in Okinawa, he re-edited it to include his own artistic perspective, changing the title of the film to *Yūtei* ('Play Garden') for a screening held in Taiwan. Notably he added the subtitle *exeunt omnes* (Latin: 'all off the stage') as part of his new work to indicate what happens when islanders are off stage. If

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creative voices such as his are nurtured, stories of the island can be kept alive through new forms of artistic storytelling.

Searching for Spirits in the Sea

The island of Kudaka was first introduced to me by Okinawan-born curator Haruka Iharada (1991-) as “the island of *kamisama*” or island of the Gods. In our discussions she recalled the island where she was born and raised, Akashima, an island forty-kilometers west of Naha in the Kerama archipelago. We found the Kerama islands share rich spiritual stories passed down from previous generations; and there are specific references to the islands in the songs of the *Omoro sōshi* as well as modern musicals. She introduced me to young artists working in Okinawa, including Hikaru, the aforementioned filmmaker whose ancestors were from Kudaka. He and I explored his family house on Kudaka and spent hours debating the potential of art and found a shared disbelief in depicting ‘others’ with a distant documentary method. In dialogue with islanders, ideas are born, and together with them artworks come to life. In the creative process, sociopolitical elements are crucial to understanding layers, but they are not everything. I work in dialogue with people and places, establishing an affinity between multiple parts in the process. Drawing upon interdisciplinary research, islands are one of the centers for my art practice that collaborates with other artists and islanders.

During my next visit, I invited other artists to listen to elderly islanders share their stories. In the process storytelling became a creative action where stories came to life as they joyfully shared vivid stories with young artists and myself. These stories grow while listening and blossom while working together with the islanders. One song, ‘*Isa heiyō*’ introduced to us by an elderly man on Tsuken Island revealed the interconnectivity of Tsukena and Kudaka in a love story:

Man: *‘isa heiyō*¹³ *Where is your house?*
Woman: *‘isa heiyō Under the hibiscus tree at the road crossing.*
Man: *‘isa heiyō I’d like to make a bridge of ships between Tsuken and Kudaka*
(Islands) to send over a beautiful young woman from Tsuken.
If our homes were next to each other, I’d like to talk with you about love
everyday. Do you stand turning your back because you don’t like me?
Woman: *No, I am just a little lonely.*
Man: *Oh really, me too...¹⁴*

This song ends part one of the video *Sea Birth* to suggest a connection between the two islands, linked by lovers. When this video was installed for an exhibition on Ikei Island, spirits awoke in the historical house where the work was on view. Together with Iharada and the island community we reflected upon the memories and experiences that nourished the artwork in a public dialogue held at the house. Artworks resist dominant histories, open a space for the unexplainable, the unphotographable spirits. Creative storytelling

¹³ The term *isa heiyō* is used as an interjection in the song.

¹⁴ This song ‘*Isa heiyō*’ was written by actor Ganeko Yaei (1881-1943) as part of the Okinawan dialect musical *Tōmaiākā*, which takes place in the Kerama islands mentioned above. This is the author’s translation of the song based on Seki Hiroshi’s translation into contemporary Japanese. See the web-post dated December 7th 2005: <http://taru.ti-da.net/e607508.html> - accessed 29th October 2017.

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brings us into communication with spirits alive today. One of the stories that inspired *Sea Birth* comes from Masayuki Tamae, a diver who grew up on the nearby island of Henza.



Figure 5 - Masayuki Tamae telling the story of the shipwreck near South Ukibaru Island from his boat, James Jack *Sea Birth: part one* 2017, still from digital video.

Tamae went looking for a shipwreck with a friend who remembered seeing it decades ago with some American troops circa 2005. Based on the memory of the underwater landscape, they searched for three days to find the site of the ship. After finding the ship and investigating the site together with an archaeologist, Tamae explained:

It is not certain whether it was British, Dutch or Portuguese, but in the 1800s the ship was on a voyage including Japan. Possibly on the way back from the mainland, as the ship carried Japanese coins, somehow the ship came to Okinawa; drifted here or grounded remains unknown.¹⁵

This unidentified shipwreck opened imaginative possibilities for seafaring ancestors of mine that had passed away in the sea. In the 1870s Japanese ports were being officially opened to foreign ships for the first time in over two centuries, but this ship and stories of others indicate that European ships were visiting Okinawa far more than Edo knew about. I pondered those who perished in the sea and the few who were able to swim to nearby islands, and asked their spirits to take me to the places where I was meant to go.

One by one, deities are not simply assembled to create a story along with people and places; rather, they are reflected upon just as they are: drifting in an uncertain sea. The stories come to those who are patient. Upon asking a priestess to sing a sacred song for him, Higa learned an important lesson: she said it was impossible to sing for him at that moment because she does not sing the songs; the deities sing the songs for her (2000: 82).

¹⁵ Tamae, M (2017) interview with the author held at Marine Space Dive Shop September 7th 2017 and on a boat near South Ukibaru Island September 12th 2017.

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Here I realised that the sea spirits show themselves to us only on their own time. The grave of one Chinese drifter, located on land taken by the U.S. military has, so far, been impossible to find. However while talking with community residents, a local town record surfaced. In it was a recorded of the encounter between survivors from the shipwreck and the Okinawans:

People of Heshikiya village who noticed the drifters prepared water and met them on the coast called Ishigahama. However, the drifters pointed guns toward a large number of villagers. The villagers held their kuba wood ladles used for pumping water from a well that is too deep to draw water, so the drifters understood what the villagers thought and landed without anxiety. At that time, a person responsible for the town of Heshikiya, where the town clerk burned wood and carbonized it into powder, thereby wrote characters in the sand. Since one of Chinese crewmembers could read these characters while doing simple writing (for example, “we are not your enemy; we come here to save you”), the crew were delighted and landed safely there. (Heshikiya, 1998: 435 - translated by the author)

Upon encountering this story, I felt an immediate affinity with the spirits of my unknown European ancestors. Parts of this story of a shipwreck have faded and others remain. Amidst reclaimed land, military bases and tourist developments did Ishigahama Beach still exist? A local resident pointed us to the beach that had been renamed ‘White Beach,’ near the largest U.S. naval base in Okinawa. I went to Heshikiya with a young artist now living in Naha and stood on the beach where the islanders first met the shipwreck survivors. Invisible connections were brought to life through the process of creative through writing in the sand, which became a part of the video component of *Sea Birth: part one*.

While uncovering these fragments from the past on land, I also went to search for the spirits in the sea near the shipwreck site. Guided by Tamae who has spent his life by and in the sea, we visited the site of the shipwreck. In the sea, I saw a vibrant space full of multicultural spirits. Together with another artist we swam from the shipwreck site to the nearest island, South Ukibaru, revisiting memories of the survivors in the same site. It was a transformative experience that became part of the video installation *Sea Birth: part one* (2017). After returning to the studio, I read a villager’s record of the shipwreck as it was remembered by later generations. Mixed feelings of gratitude and lamentation are evident in the last line, “it is exceedingly regretful first that these actual things, records and other items cannot be found” (Heshikiya, 1998: 436) Through dialogue with islanders along the way, stories are co-created by islanders, artists and archaeologists. Encouraging others leads participants to share stories of their own based on memories from the past.

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Figure 6 - Relic of an unidentified shipwreck (1876) on the sea floor, wood and copper
- 23.5 x 14.7 x 4.6 cm (photo courtesy of Okinawa Archaeological Culture Center).



Figure 7 - Relic exhibited as part of James Jack's *Sea Birth: part one* (2017) Museum in the Sky installation view (relic courtesy of Okinawa Archaeological Culture Center, photo by Haruka Iharada).

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Working with others making part two of the *Sea Birth* artwork, I asked participants: where do you feel most comfortable? For example, while filming with artist Miki Uchida, she chose to be near the *adan* (*Pandanus odoratissimus*) trees in the shade. While walking there together, we spoke about what places feel right. “I want to sit down here looking toward the ocean,” she said. In my artwork production, there is no script. This is important because participants’ intuition plays a crucial role in the story. While walking, we discuss her search for her own roots. I talk about how this artwork began with a search for my unknown ancestors at the site of a shipwreck near South Ukibaru Island, visible from the point where we stand together on Ukibaru Island. She shares a reflection on her mother’s roots in Okinawa as well as her upbringing in Tokyo through a discussion on her artworks consisting of colourful handmade plant sculptures. While we are filming together, she sits down together with the plants. Suddenly the plants come to life. The former inhabitants of the island now occupied by the military for helicopter training exercises come to life for a moment, shared in the artwork.



Figure 8 - James Jack *Sea Birth: part two* 2017 Still from digital video
- installation view at Taira Historic House, Okinawa.

Conclusion: Creative Storytelling *with* Islanders

This article has examined creative storytelling in artistic media together with the voices of islanders in southeast Okinawa. It has demonstrated resilience against homogeneous cultural histories. The connectivity of islands re-envision the complex network that includes the sea and multiple islands from the viewpoint of spirits. Artists re-imagine stories in different ways each time they are told. But what about the agenda behind those stories, what gets exhibited or published and when? Attempting to put a mirror up to a

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tradition, a ritual or a way of life is not as simple as sharing that mirror with the world. For example, artist Okamoto Tarō's "mirror" aligned with the strategy of the nation-state working to revert Okinawa to Japan.¹⁶ Presenting stories not as clean mirrors, but as complex networks built amidst prohibitions opens the possibility for creative storytelling to resist. Stories co-created with islanders nourish viewpoints that go deeper than polarised history between two sides. As one marine archaeologist, Chiaki Katagiri, recounts:

Stories such as this have been told in the local folklore. For me what is interesting is that we can confirm the reality of widely known folklore by seeing the shipwreck at the bottom of the sea. Having been handed down in this way and now with the reality of the shipwreck ruins, it is exciting to think about how this folklore will continue to be told in the future.¹⁷

Creative storytelling contributes to the rich future of islands in connection to sea spirits. Telling and retelling stories in ways that are sensitive to the islanders provides alternative frameworks for considering the contemporary conditions we live in today in more diverse ways.

Based on the art activities in this article, two conclusions can be made regarding the potential of creative storytelling with islanders. The first is to bring attention to overlooked places, oral histories and oppressed people. Focusing on these places requires closely examining death, suffering and sadness with the heart where the potential to create new imaginaries that nourish the spirits of these places. Amidst the uncertainty of colonial and plantation remnants, nissologists are painting positive models for the future: "There are so many visions, so many possible futures... I cannot tell the future, but I have hope" (Grydehøj, 2017: 12). Many people have been fighting diligently for the dismantling of Japanese colonisation and of American occupation of Okinawa. The islands discussed in this article present possibilities for the rejuvenation of indigenous spirits in the complex society we live in today.

The second conclusion builds from the first: artistic reflections can open complex issues from the past and address traumatic conditions in enchanting ways. In tandem with scholars who document, record and analyse important island cultures and traditions, artists can create visual work that opens space for collective reflection. Shifts in scholarly analysis toward subjective approaches overlap with the methods of artists. For instance, reflecting on his work after a tumultuous earthquake, the artist Francis Alÿs stated, "Instead of adding physical elements to the city, my reaction was to insert stories" (Jack, 2013: online). Artists insert stories in unique ways that are part of the process of mythmaking. These myths circulate spirits of deities that resist colonial remnants. Artistic expression is linked with empowerment, which has political potential for the community. Shipwrecked drifters and priestesses may disappear from this life, but their spirits live on in the creative realm. This article suggests they may also live in the scholarly field of island studies.

¹⁶ Okamoto's aforementioned book 'Forgotten Japan' is an example of how an essentialist view of Okinawa frames the culture of the islands within the nation-state of Japan, seeking the origins for a spirituality that was being lost on the other islands of Postwar Japan. Nonetheless, during the occupation period (1942-1972) Okinawans who voiced opposition to American rule also believed things might be worse under the Japanese (Augustine, 2008: 91).

¹⁷ Interviews conducted on 30 May 2016 and 25 January 2017 at Okinawa Prefecture Historical Museum and 6 September 2017 at Okinawa Archaeological Culture Center.

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Thinking together about what elements to preserve in a historic place and what aspects to improvise in a sensitive way, it is likely that one hundred years from now, our understanding of history will shift and be filled with alternative worldviews that we cannot yet imagine. The interpretive frameworks of the field are a useful method for examining the complicated relationship that we have with our past, struggling to understand ourselves while inclining us to edit out our faults. Art allows us to address these spirits directly, not to describe or interpret them but to channel them into creative forms of expression. Relics retrieved from the past give us hints for the creation of stories in the present. Memos, sketches and ideas are traces of a process that is harmonised with memories, stories and histories of islanders. Creative art is a powerful method for sharing stories. Through it, people can open to the vast spiritual world alive in the sea.

Creative storytelling is only one part of sustained social engagement. Community activists, island leaders and workers for social change are working continuously toward larger aims. Their labours build a base where relics, stories, ideas and traditions are accessible to future generations. Artists give form to the connective links between people, places and things that already exist, yet might otherwise remain unseen. Creative storytelling stimulates dialogue between people who have gotten along for decades and are now divided by a military fence. Islanders' creative stories show that reality is not decided upon singly by those in political power. Island spirits define reality if people care for them. The sea retains them. Defining reality from the viewpoint of spirits is a form of resilience against colonial versions of reality. Imagination runs deep in the ocean. I conclude with an extract from the Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* reflecting on the powerful cycle of stories:

Should this be the end of the story? a kind of sigh? a last ripple of the wave? A trickle of water to some gutter where, burbling, it dies away? Let me touch the table—so—and thus recover my sense of the moment. A sideboard covered with cruets; a basket full of rolls; a plate of bananas—these are comfortable sights. But if there are no stories, what end can there be, or what beginning? Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it. Sitting up late at night it seems strange not to have more control. Pigeon-holes are not then very useful. It is strange how force ebbs away into some dry creek. Sitting alone, it seems we are spent; our waters can only just surround feebly that spike of sea-holly; we cannot reach that further pebble so as to wet it. It is over, we are ended. But wait—I sat all night waiting—an impulse again runs through us; we rise, we toss back a mane of white spray; we pound on the shore; we are not to be confined. (1931: 205)

Waves are one metaphor for creative resilience— they resist confinement. Our thinking can be as fluid and as powerful as waves. This article has discussed some methods of creative storytelling via art, songs and literature made by artists together with islanders. There are far more extant methods for achieving the same aims. The next incarnation of *Izaihō* is due in 2026. Will each sea spirit return to their own sacred grove on the islands? So long as we nurturing their existence in the present, the spirits will continue to nurture us long into the future.

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