

# JAWS

Japan Anthropology Workshop

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## RESEARCH REPORTS

### A Shrinking Circle

#### **Festival, Leadership and Institutional Changes in a Japanese Fishing Village.**

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In recent decades, the theme of institution has reassumed a key role in the analysis of regional dynamics of state societies such as Japan, raising important debates that have finally ditched the contributions of post-war rural ethnography. The theme of my research aims to give an overview on the transformation of organizational systems in a small Japanese fishing community, by linking aspects of the local political culture with national and prefectural government policies. Moreover, my thesis focuses also on a series of economic and social issues that characterize contemporary rural Japan. The social and economic reality of rural Japan is presented as a “peripheral”, plagued by problems such as aging population, unemployment and emigration in urban areas (Traphagan & Knight 2003), and therefore the lack of generational activities in the primary and secondary sectors. In particular, communities living in *ritō* (“remote island”) are those who experience more several difficulties in terms of economy and social life. Geographical dislocation, insularity, increased vulnerability to weather events (cyclones, tsunamis, storm surges) compared to coastal areas, a fragile ecological system (the delicate balance between the natural environment and traditional fishing techniques) and seawater pollution are the main factors that affect the welfare of local communities.

Over the past fifty years, the Japanese government has approved a number of legislative measures to promote the economic and social development of remote islands. The “Law for the Improvement of Sea Routes for Remote Islands” (*ritōkōroseibihō*), promulgated July 4, 1952 (hereinafter abbreviated as “Remote Islands Law”, (*ritōhō*), was the first measure of government intervention in the communities stationed on remote islands. Municipalities that administer remote islands on the basis of these laws have the task of developing a regional economic program, which is financially and legally supported by the central government. The economic and financial crisis was decisive in the political issues of readjustment and reorganization of the productive sectors. In the fisheries sector, which is the main economic activity of communities living in remote islands,

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thanks to the Law for the Promotion of Incorporation of Fishing Cooperative Associations promulgated in 2002, several local fishing cooperatives (*gyogyōkumiai*) were merged together to improve fish productivity through a centralized administrative system. The transformations that took place at the organizational level in fish cooperatives have resulted in a further change in the internal policies of the fishing community.

From ethnographic analysis of these processes, a series of issues related to institutional microphysics and topics such as the negotiation of values in the remodeling of local societies, the strategies of cultural adaptation, social groups and local identity processes emerge. In order to shed light on these issues, my research aims to highlight the relationship between the organization and strategies with local religious institutions which have dealt with the economic, social and demographic transformations in Kamishima (“Island of God”), a small fishing community stationed at the entrance of Ise Bay. Specifically, my ethnographic research focuses on the complex celebration of the New Year (*shōgatsu*). The main features of *shōgatsu* in Kamishima are a series of religious ceremonies, collectively called *gētā matsuri*, which take place between December and January (Kokubo 1983). Originally, the financial administration of these events was managed and performed by the *miyamochi* (“person in charge”) and *inkyoshu* (“group of elderly retired”): the *miyamochi*, elected according to specific selection criteria (seniority, economic stability, health, etc.), the *miyamochi* is responsible for organizing the rituals and ceremonies of the community, whereas the *inkyoshu* is an organization composed by those who have already played this role (Tanabe & Tanabe 1980). The *miyamochi* was originally connected to the organizational system of *seko* (“district”), based on the historical configuration of the settlement. Kamishima is divided into three districts named *higashi seko* (“eastern district”), *naka seko* (“center district”) and *minami seko* (“southern district”), and represent, together with *chōnaikai* (“neighborhood associations”) and *gyōkyōkumiai*, the executive organs of the community.

The worsening demographic situation of the community caused a deep readjustment of the organizational system of *miyamochi*: the lack of parents and children who attend the *miyamochi* during the celebrations and the heavy financial burden represent the leading cause of renunciation from the elders to carry out this task. To address these issues, over the last decade, the fishing cooperative association of Kamishima covered expenses for religious celebrations, providing also its headquarters to celebrate the major ceremonial events. Founded in 1943, the cooperative of Kamishima manages the local fishing trade, and in 2003, the cooperative merged with the *gyōkyōkumiai* of Toba, becoming a single cooperative entity, including also other cooperatives in the region of the Ise Bay. Because of its financial skills and higher revenues from the experience gained by the new

administrative reality, it was decided to entrust the *gyōgyokumiai* with the responsibility to manage the funds of the religious events of in the main Shinto shrine. In addition, in order to reduce the commitments of *miyamochi*, the cooperative has established funding for *miyamochi*. The *kumiaichō* (“Director of the fishing cooperative association”) started to play a key role in the organization and administration of financial events of the religious community, because, in addition to managing finances, he has the task of negotiating the role of *miyamochi* with candidates. In many cases, he also plays the role of *chonaikaichō* (“Director of the neighborhood association”), and *rojinkaichō* (“Director of pensioners association”), and of *kannushi* (shinto priest) of in the local shinto shrine. The centralization of institutional roles in one person shows that the role of *kumiaichō* is vital to the community.

The analysis of institutional transformations that have involved this community, took a wider scope than the single ethnographic topic, in order to highlight how the “processes of the institutional infiltration” have actually made their way in the complicated web of social relationships, strongly rooted in the territory, which characterize the life of this community. The analysis of these social processes raises also questions on the organizational dynamics of Kamishima, which can be taken as a case study to understand the relationship between central government authorities and rural communities (center-periphery), and power relations among members of the community (local leadership).

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