

## Agenashiku Island

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The tropical island cluster of Kerama lies about 32 kilometers southwest of the main island of Okinawa. This group of islands is famous for its azure-clear waters and perfect scuba diving. That was what enticed me there, in the summer of 1981, to make my first dive.

After arriving in Naha airport from Tokyo, I transferred to a small, propeller driven six-seater plane that flew across the straits to an airstrip on Fukaji, a small, uninhabited island in the Kerama chain. The island is basically a mesa sticking out of the sea and therefore perfectly suited for a runway: tall and flat-topped, with the landing strip stretching the length of the island. On the approach, the pilot made a frightful dive right toward the tall cliffs under the runway, but at the last moment lifted and landed right on its edge with perfect accuracy. We deplaned and walked a hundred meters to a small dock next to the landing strip. Waiting for us there was an oversized rowboat with an outboard engine. This was our transfer to Zamami, the main island in the Kerama chain. The boatman motioned us on. I stowed my luggage under the seat, and we headed out to sea, bouncing on the waves. After hours cramped in the artificial confines of aircraft, the sun, wind and ocean spray felt sublime.

Zamami, unlike the airport, has a proper village that caters mostly to divers and tourists, most of whom arrive on the twice daily ferry from Naha. Fronting the harbor are several stores, a fishing cooperative and some *minshuku* inns. The few automobiles I saw seemed superfluous, as it would be easy to walk anywhere in the island.

The *minshuku* I booked was situated next to the docks overlooking the sea. I settled into the tatami room and looked out the window toward the bay; a natural harbor protected by shallow, undulating hills. The blue waters continued past the docks out toward the open ocean. Small punts and fishing boats floated on the

water's surface. As I lifted my gaze, I noticed a small, sandy island floating just a few hundred meters past the mouth of the bay. This lone piece of land seemed enticingly out of reach: it was too far away to swim but too close to be served by a regular boat service. My imagination stirred, I decided to go there to explore.

The next day was my first scuba lesson. It wasn't really a lesson but more of a beginner's crash course on how to use the equipment, how to breathe and how to sink oneself down into the water or float oneself up to the surface. We were told we would go no further down than eight meters or so, and that sounded fairly safe even for a total novice like myself. The instructor accompanied his students the entire dive, hovering over us like a concerned mother.

I love to snorkel, but I soon realized that diving with a scuba tank was a totally different activity. With a snorkel at least you maintain a connection with the atmosphere; air remains inside your lungs, and although you carry it as far down as possible, it is usually not very deep since fear of drowning forces you to return to the surface very soon. With scuba, this vital connection is cut and you are separated from the atmosphere and the natural process of breathing, forcing you to rely on the mechanical process that automatically delivers air from the tank. It is a matter of trust, I realized: trust of the equipment, trust of your partner and trust of yourself. I felt very much an alien in this liquid world and realized that to stay safe I must follow the rules very strictly.

The beauty of the underwater world, however, soon compensates for the temporary disorientation of the element. Fishes flash in front of the eyes, coral radiates with life and light filtered by the clear waters while various creatures bend into the folds of rock and crag.

As fascinating as the sights were, I found myself more absorbed by the sounds. I had imagined, being cut off from the air, that the underwater world would be totally silent: it was anything but. Minute, repetitious high-speed clicks pulsed into my ears. The lugubrious rhythm of a boat engine sounded somewhere, punctuated occasionally by sharp, metallic pings, and waves of low frequency vibrations, more

felt than heard, swept through my body. Above all this was the overwhelmingly loud sound of my own breath, mechanically supported by the breathing apparatus, creating a kind of ostinato to the other, busy underwater sounds.

I tried to triangulate the sounds I heard. Thinking that the boat sounds should be coming from the direction of the docks, I turned around into that direction, but no matter which way I turned there was no difference in sound. The clicks and pings were also the same; there was absolutely no sense of directionality to them. They seemed to be everywhere but nowhere at the same time. On the other hand, my breath sounds were certain: they were originating within me, and this contrasted with the omnidirectional sound of the outer world. It was as if the world I dived into consisted of only two dimensions: the inner world of breath and the outer world of the sea sounds. Yet even these external sounds seemed, upon reflection, to be inner sounds, since they lacked a sense of spatial orientation and entered my perception at more or less the same volume regardless of distance or direction.

Distracted by the sounds, I drifted further into a reverie. Was this how a fetus, floating in its embryonic fluids, perceives its world? Or perhaps it was even more primordial: harking back to the beginnings of consciousness itself and an age when there was absolutely no distinction nor duality.

Suddenly, however, the reverie snapped and a moment of intense fear gripped me, bringing me back into the present. I was underwater with a panic attack. Can I continue breathing? Should I surface or stay? The instructor was several meters in front of me; even if I managed to get his attention, would he understand this immense panic I felt? Fortunately, the disorientation was brief, and by concentrating my own loud, mechanical breath, I was able to come back to myself and quell the panic.

After a rest at noon, I asked the innkeeper, who was also our diving instructor, about the small island just outside the bay. He told me it was an uninhabited island called Agenashiku, adding that many divers go there during the day to rest between dives. I asked if it had always been uninhabited. At this point he hesitated

and looked down. After a short silence he told me that the Kerama Islands had been the first islands the American military took in their assault on Okinawa near the end of the war. Agenashiku, being conveniently located just outside the harbor, was the staging area for the US army to prepare for the invasion of Zamami and subsequently the main Okinawa Islands. Furthermore, he told me his mother had witnessed the invasion. Although many locals were either killed or forced by the mainland Japanese army to commit suicide, she somehow survived. Yet she never spoke of her experience, he said. She sat most of the day at her window, silently watching the sea.

I remembered seeing her earlier that day as I walked by her window, her gaze directed outward. I greeted her, but she hardly seemed to notice me.

Being in Japan means, from time to time, confronting the aftermath of the war, but nowhere is this aftermath as close to the surface as in Okinawa. I knew this, yet I came here to enjoy the diving, beaches and the tropical atmosphere. The innkeeper, who was not much older than I, also knew this, and he, like most post-war Japanese, was more interested in the present and future than the past. His priorities were to take care of his guests with as much *omotenashi* hospitality as he could muster.

The innkeeper also taught me my first words in Okinawan: *naichaa* and *uchinaanchu*. Since I came from the main islands, I was *naichaa*. Native Okinawans call themselves *uchinaanchu*. Interestingly, I was no longer considered a *gaijin*—the word most Japanese use to indicate a foreigner. It didn't seem to matter that I wasn't Japanese; as long as I was an outsider I was not one of them and therefore *naichaa*.

That afternoon I asked him to take me to Agenashiku.

The island was delightful, like one might imagine of a deserted tropical island. I had my own private beach unperturbed by anyone. After a swim, I began to explore the island. It was narrow, shaped like a sandal, with a beach running down one side. In the middle of the island were small hills covered with shrubbery, and

the opposite side consisted of rocky shoals.

As I walked down the beach side, I noticed a rather large cave that extended into the hillside. I climbed in, and as I got further inside I saw that there was an opening at the end of the cavern that lead out to the other side of the island, and I realized that I could walk through the cave to the opposite side of the island. As I approached the far opening, however, I became aware of two people sitting there. An elderly man faced the sea through the opening, and a woman sat to his side, watching him intently.

The man was in an attitude of prayer. In front of him were several ceremonial objects: paper money, candles, incense and cups filled with liquid, which I took to be the local *awamori* wine. I realized that I had accidentally stumbled onto some kind of prayer service. I was fascinated, but since I didn't want to disturb their ceremony, I remained a respectful distance away and kneeled down to watch.

The man noticed me and turned my way. I expected a look of annoyance for the interruption, but instead he motioned me next to him. I approached and sat down. I was about to ask him what he was doing, but before I spoke he turned to me and explained that he was calling the spirits of a deceased Japanese soldier who had perished here in the invasion of Okinawa, and that this woman was the soldier's daughter. The man then announced that he was going into a trance and would speak the voice of the deceased.

I realized that I had inadvertently stumbled across a *yuta* shaman, famous in Okinawa history and tradition. The *yuta* act as priests, provide spiritual guidance and are interlocutors between the world of the dead and the living. The woman had apparently engaged his services to do a prayer service.

I was interested in Japanese shamanism and knew that the native mediums were still an important part of the traditional culture in Okinawa, much like the *itako* shaman of Aomori of northeast Japan. I had read, however, that *yuta*, like the *itako*, were all female and usually blind. This *yuta* was neither.

He turned back to his temporary altar, closed his eyes and sat silent for a while.

Sounds in the cave suddenly stilled. The only sensation was the softly blowing ocean winds, providing a cool respite to the heat. Outside, the waters shimmered in the afternoon sun.

The man suddenly began to speak. His voice changed in tone from his normal cadence, rose in pitch and became agitated. His tone was declarative, like an officer giving commands to a subordinate. His personality, down to gesticulations and utterances, completely transformed. And although I was not very familiar with the Okinawa dialect, the man seemed to be speaking an entirely different language altogether.

This lasted about five minutes. He suddenly grew silent and the muscles in his face and throat relaxed, head slumped over. After a moment he opened his eyes and took a deep breath, then turned to the woman to explain what had transpired.

“It was your father talking through me,” he said. “He didn’t die here but a few meters closer to the sea, so you need to move the altar a bit. He also said that you should come here more often to pray.” The spirit had offered some personal advice as well. “Your have some health problems and need to eat a more balanced diet. Don’t worry about your children, they are going through a rough time right now but they will be alright.”

The woman listened carefully and took this in with great solemnity. The whole time, however, she seemed perturbed that I was there and occasionally shot me suspicious looks. Suddenly, I saw myself through her eyes: an uninvited *naichaa* who had intruded on a very personal occasion. Moreover, I was Caucasian. I also realized that she perceived me as US military (most Okinawans of her age understandably assume that all young foreign men are connected with the US military) and as a result, I was doubly unwelcome, considering the circumstances. I really could not fault her annoyance.

I did not want to intrude on her private ceremony, so I got up to leave. At that moment the man turned to me and told me no, stay. He then began speaking to me with the same earnestness I had witnessed during his trance. And thus begun one

of the most amazing conversations I have ever had in Japan.

“No one believes in the *ukami* here anymore,” he said, using the Okinawan word for *kami* or deity. “They think they can go about their lives without any guidance or directions from the *ukami*, but that is not the case. I see so many problems that could be solved with just a little spiritual insight, but everyone is too busy chasing material wealth and forgetting about our old Okinawa customs. It is really sad.”

He confirmed to me that he was a *yuta*, and I said that I had thought *yuta* were all female.

“Most are,” he said, “but the powerful ones are usually male.” He continued, “Many *naichaa* come from the mainland to research the *yuta* mediums, but they always get it wrong. They think that we are individuals with a special power that enables us to speak with the *ukami*, but we’re really not special. These *naichaa* scholars look at us as interesting objects of study and want to research and document our prayers and methods, but they miss the important thing: that they too need to become more aware of the *ukami* and communicate with them. You don’t have to be a *yuta* to talk to the gods: anyone can speak with them and get their guidance. But sadly, very few realize that.”

In his animated talk to me, he completely forgot about the woman, who sat glumly looking on.

I knew an important opportunity had presented itself to me. I could never plan such a meeting, but here I had stumbled across a rare person who was imparting valuable insight. I knew I had to concentrate and listen, and I wished I had a tape recorder. My mind spun with numerous questions, but I didn’t want to seem like one of the clueless *naichaa* scholars.

Instead I asked, simply, why are you telling me all this?

“I knew you were coming even before you stepped in the cave. Then when you approached and sat down near me, I knew I had to tell you this. You need to go back and tell people what I said.”

At this the woman cleared her throat to get his attention. He turned to her and

said a few more things and then began packing up to leave. I stood, said my goodbyes to the *yuta* and walked back out the entrance to the cave.

The innkeeper arrived at our designated time to pick me up and take me back to the *minshuku*. That evening, while falling asleep, I thought about the underwater sounds in the sea and how they seemed to come from nowhere yet everywhere; both external and internal at the same time. *Uchinaanchu, naichaa*i; guest, native: it really didn't matter in the end. It is important to listen to the breath and the voices within, and one really didn't have to be *yuta* to understand that.

The next morning, walking around the village, I hoped to run into the *yuta* again before the ferry departed for the Okinawa mainland. I didn't see him, though I did accidentally cross paths with the woman. I offered her a greeting, but she made a point of ignoring me.



The village of Zamami, with Agenashiku Island to the left of the bay entrance.