

Introduction

I came to Shiraishi Island in 1997 to see what my great grandfather saw in 1900 from a US military transport ship called the US Thomas. While returning from a trip transporting soldiers to the Philippines, he had passed through the Seto Inland Sea and left his impressions in a diary. From the verandah of the Shiraishi International villa where I was staying, the panoramic views of the Seto Inland Sea were just as my great grandfather had described. Except that this time, I was on an island, a small mountain rising out of the sea. What I saw then in 1997 can still be seen today if you come to Shiraishi Island.

A port full of fishing boats, and rows of vegetable gardens situated inland shows how most people make their living. Futons are slung over windowsills and wakame seaweed hangs on clothes lines. Men wile away the evening hours untangling fishing nets. Women, their faces hiding behind bonnets, push wheel barrows of vegetables, dirt still clinging to the roots. An 87-year-old woman sings **enka** to the sea. She tells me to sing along with her. The words are easy, so I do:

Karasu naze naku yo,
Karasu wa yama ni kawaii,
Nanatsu no koe ga are kara yo

(Crow, why are you singing?)
(Crow, you are beautiful on the mountain)
(Because you have 7 songs).

Two women carrying evergreen branches walk down onto the beach. I follow them. They wade out into the water. I do too. The tide is low enough that we can walk all the way out to the little island where a shrine is waiting. They pray and leave but I linger a while longer. Then I wade back and hike up the mountain where I can see an old man and woman collecting bracken. From the top of the mountain, I can see as far as the Seto Ohashi bridge which connects the two major Japanese islands of Honshu and Shikoku. There are tiny islands on either side of me and ships pass deftly between them. Some of the ships are as big as my great grandfather's.

I spent five days on the island, deep under its spell. When the time came for me to leave, to go back to the mainland of Honshu, I boarded the ferry and watched Shiraishi Island disappear into my past, remembering what my great grandfather had written in his diary: "As we sailed down the channel toward the great Pacific, I gave the mere outline of the mountains and valleys of the 'Land of Flowers and Sunshine' a parting glance." I too, somehow felt I was leaving Japan.

There are certain places in this world that radiate positive energy, and Shiraishi Island is one of them. Everyone who comes here feels the magic. In just a few days, one is in tune

with the rhythms of life here and is drawn into the simple beauty of the people, their island, and a lifestyle that hasn't changed for the past 100 years. It is this magic that drew me back, but this time to stay. I've lived here 8 years now, and the island is as enchanting to me as it was the first time I came.

I've had several people take on the role of "island guru" during my time on Shiraishi. I'm beginning to think that every few years the island holds a meeting to determine who is going to teach the **gaijin** (foreigner) for the next few years. First it was Mr. Amano who arranged the rental of the house I am living in and who created opportunities for me to communicate with the island people. He invited me to participate in events and to teach at the local school. Then my neighbor Ueda-san introduced to me the basics of island living and took care of my every need. After she died, her daughter-in-law took over, encouraging me to join in cultural events and teaching me about some of the Japanese arts. Then the Buddhist priest spent a good few years educating me about Buddhism, Shintoism and the roots of Japanese culture. Most recently, the job has been taken over by 75-year-old Rikimatsu-san, an ex-commercial fisherman who has taken me under his fin, determined to teach me how to fish. These are the people who have passed their culture down to me, to scrutinize, to analyze, to participate in and most of all, to cherish. And sometimes, it seems like I am the only person younger than them who does care about preserving these traditions of old Japan.

Throughout this book, I will explain the traditions and the history behind this island of just 700 people. While many of the traditions still exist, most are on the verge of extinction. As the young people grow up and move to the cities in search of higher-paying jobs, the island population continues to decrease. When all the older generation, the people native to the island, have passed away, the island traditions will pass away with them.

I have assembled this book so that you too can feel the magic of Shiraishi Island. For those of you who have the chance to physically make the trip here, I have described best I can what you will find once you get here. For those of you who cannot come, I invite you to make the spiritual journey with me right now. Just look over my shoulder and we will experience the rhythms and the traditions of the island together. We will pound rice cakes, fish for sardines, dance a traditional island dance, meet the Goddess of the Sea and take part in a ceremony to send all the bad insects off the island in a boat. We'll meet Yamakawa-san, the old woman with whom I sang enka to the sea, the Buddhist priest, and some other very special people on the island. Lastly, we'll attend a Buddhist ceremony. If you stay with me till the end of this book, and if I have done my job well, you too will go away touched by the magic of Shiraishi Island.

Amy Chavez
Shiraishi Island
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