

Village Life in Amami Oshima

Many of Amami Oshima's villages are nestled in inlets, and islanders have traditionally lived off the bounty of the forests and the sea. To this day, local residents have a deep reverence for nature and try to live in harmony with the environment. Most villages preserve a *kami-michi* (spirit road), which is said to mark the route spirits take from the mountains to the sea.

Respect for nature runs deep in Japan's traditional animistic spirituality. Villagers believe that spirits reside all around us in the natural world, and that their own livelihoods are dependent on the gifts of nature. This engenders feelings of profound gratitude and respect for the natural world, which remain strong throughout the Ryukyu Islands. It is common for villagers to give thanks when gathering wood, plants, or food, and also to offer a prayer to the spirits when venturing into the forests.

Akina Ikusato Village

A 35-minute drive northeast from the museum, this small port village is one area on the island where there is significant rice cultivation, and migrating birds stop to rest and feed in the paddy fields. Village life still moves according to the rhythm of the seasons and lunar cycles, and traditions are observed according to the traditional Japanese calendar. Local people fish and harvest shrimp, octopus, and shellfish, and also hunt wild boar in the mountain forests nearby. In late summer, they hold the Hirase Mankai Festival, a tradition that has existed for at least four centuries. The festival, during which priestesses (*noro*) pray for good harvests, has been designated an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property.

Nishi-nakama Village

This small settlement about a 35-minute drive southwest from the museum is an excellent example of how many villages across the Amami Islands seek to maintain their beliefs, customs, and ways of living in harmony with nature. The *kami-michi* (spirit road), a route that runs through the village and is said to mark the path spirits take from the mountains to the sea, is still treated with reverence. Catching Japanese mitten crabs (*mizugani*) in the Sumiyo River has been a village tradition for at least two centuries. At the Honensai Harvest Festival, held annually on August 15 of the old lunar calendar, participants express gratitude to nature and offer up prayers to ward off evil.