

The Three Villages of Yambaru

Kunigami

Kunigami is the northernmost village in Yambaru and the largest in area and population, with some 4,000 residents. It includes Okinawa Island's tallest mountain, Mt. Yonahadake (503 meters), and one of its most striking natural landscapes, the towering cliffs and eroded limestone surfaces near Cape Hedo. Over 84 percent of its area is tree-covered, making it the most densely forested Yambaru village. The residents of Kunigami, like those of the other villages, have made use of the forest resources and managed the production of charcoal, lumber, and Ryukyu indigo. Traditional festivals include the Shinugu festival, which varies slightly from hamlet to hamlet. The festival in Ada is particularly famous. The men of Ada make headdresses from mountain vines and beat drums as they descend from the mountain; the women meet them at the village. Performances celebrating a good harvest are held along with dances that continue late into the night.

Ogimi

The village of Ogimi extends from the beaches of the western coast to the central mountains, and has a population of around 3,000. The Ta-taki Falls in Ogimi's forest are fed by the heavy rains that fall on Yambaru. Other notable features of the forest are rock walls constructed hundreds of years ago to protect crops from wild boars. Ogimi is renowned for its ancient tradition of weaving *bashofu*, a cloth made from the stems of *itobasho*, a type of banana plant. The intricate and time-consuming craft produces a highly prized fabric that once was used not only for clothes worn by the

villagers, but also for gifts to the royal family and warrior class of the

Ryukyu Kingdom. The people of Ogimi also cultivate *shikuwasa*, a tiny, fragrant citrus fruit that grows wild in the local limestone mountains. The village now accounts for 60 percent of Japan's *shikuwasa* production.

Higashi

Higashi, located on the southeastern coast of Yambaru, is its least

populated village, with about 1,000 inhabitants. It has many forested mountains, but is also home to Okinawa Island's largest mangrove forest. The mangroves grow in a coastal intertidal zone where the land is above the water at low tide and submerged at high tide, creating a unique ecosystem of plants and wildlife. The people of Higashi traditionally followed the Yambaru practice of harvesting the forests for timber, firewood, and charcoal, and shipping them to less forested parts of the island. This practice continued into the years after World War II, when such resources helped rebuild the infrastructure devastated by the war. Higashi is Japan's largest producer of pineapples, but is also known for other crops, including mangoes and vegetables—as well as for its Agu pork, which comes from pigs raised on a pineapple diet.