

BECOMING ISLAND

The Aquapelagic Assemblage of Benten-sai Festivals on Sakurajima, in Sai Village, northern Japan

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ABSTRACT: In the maritime districts of Sai village, on Shimokita Peninsula in the far north of Japan's Honshu island, annual one-day festivals called Benten-sai are held to worship Benzaiten, the Hindu-Buddhist-Shintō goddess deeply associated with islands in Japan. In Yagoshi District, an uninhibited rocky islet named Sakurajima serves as the sacred domain for Benzaiten on a set day each year when a flotilla of boats arrives, a local folk dance is performed and ceremonial food and drink is consumed. During the ritual, the barren rock becomes an island by means of performance and the residents who conduct it also become part of an aquapelagic assemblage as the flotilla parades in traditional fishing waters, extending the space of the island into the sea. As a consequence, the performance, the goddess and the island become each other as (and in) an aquapelagic assemblage.

KEYWORDS: Benten-sai, Benzaiten, Sai, aquapelagic assemblage

Introduction

There are many islands and rocks named Bentenjima around mainland Japan. The name – meaning 'Benten Island' – indicates that they are sanctuaries for the goddess Benzaiten (shortened to Benten), who is a transfiguration of a Brahman and Buddhist deva (divine being) and Shintō goddesses. Shimokita Peninsula, in the northernmost part of Honshu, has several islands and shrines named after Benzaiten where festivals are conducted in her honour. This article discusses the aquapelagic assemblage of Bentensai, an annual festival dedicated to Benzaiten, in the maritime districts of Sai Village, on the western coast of the Shimokita peninsula. The Benten-sai festivals of Sai are conducted on a national holiday called *Umi no Hi Kinenbi* ('Sea Day Anniversary'), held on the third Monday of July, that was originally established to raise public awareness about marine issues. The festival entails a Shintō ceremony, a flotilla of fishing boats carrying the Benten's *dashi* (a decorated platform) to the island, a performance of traditional Shintō *kagura* music and dance dedicated to the goddess on the island, and a *naorai* banquet to conclude the proceedings. The discussions in this article reflect on the Benten-sai held on 20 July 2015 in the Yagoshi District of Sai Village.

The Yagoshi Benten-sai highlights the fact that aquapelagic assemblages are by nature performative. Benzaiten's symbolic fecundity becomes real as it is experienced in performative time-space, an aspect that deepens the understanding of aquapelagic assemblages as congruent with the Japanese concept of *shima* (Suwa 2007, 2012). The Benzaiten is an embodiment of time-space; it weaves out communal senses that cross over

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religious cosmologies and, by means of performance, an obscure rock becomes island. In this regard, the word “assemblage” is more appropriate than mere “syncretism”. In Yagoshi the annual ritual of dedication to Benzaiten results in a folk festival being held on the otherwise obscure rock that annually becomes a sanctuary of the goddess. The assemblage of the performance becomes aquapelagic as the fishing boats proceed to the island with the goddess’s amulet. In that action, the island and performative culture are combined as an assemblage not simply reflecting but embedding each other’s qualities. The island ceases to be an island without performance, and the performance loses sustainability without a given island space.

Benzaiten as divinity

Benzaiten is an assemblage of water, island, serpent, language, music and prosperity. She has been identified as a Japanese adaptation of the Hindu deva Sarasvati, the personified sacred river. As in her Chinese name, *Biancaitian* (literally ‘Speech-rule-deva’), Sarasvati also rules over language and music through association with the Vedic chant that celebrates the river and the sound of the stream. Benzaiten’s standard icon is a graceful female figure often holding the *biwa* (Japanese lute) in a sitting posture on the floor, as if about to play some music. The set of Chinese syllables *bian-cai-tian* transliterates in Japanese as *ben-zai-ten*. Since this combination of syllables can also be interpreted as ‘facilitate-asset-deva’, she has been more commonly associated with prosperity than speech and language in Japan. In addition to this aspect, the iconography of Benzaiten often overlaps with that of Kichijōten (Mahashri in Buddhism) and Kudokuten (Lakshumi in Hinduism), sacred figures who bring prosperity, beauty and fortune. Moreover, Japanese esoteric Buddhism syncretised Benzaiten with a mysterious medieval deity called Ugajin, who was half serpent and half rainmaker, as a result of which Benten’s messenger is often depicted as an albino snake (Yamamoto, 1998).

In Shintō, Benzaiten is syncretised with the goddess Ichikishimahime, whose name derives from a combination of the words *itsuki-shima-hime* (literally ‘the woman who resides on the island’), as she is the guardian of island sanctuaries. Gender prohibition customs in some local Benzaiten worship rituals might derive from a belief in Ichikishimahime. Munakata Jinja, the Shintō shrine on Okinoshima Island, north west of Fukuoka, enshrines Ichikishimahime along with her two sisters in space that comprises the entire island, which is considered as an animistic spirit in its own right and is off-limits for women and men who are not members of the Shintō sect. Toyotamahime, the goddess of the sea, is another facet of Benzaiten’s identity, associated with the ocean and prosperity.¹

The transfiguration of Benzaiten can be partially explained by a Japanese religious theory known as *honji suijaku*. This medieval concept regards native Shintō gods as becoming Hindu-Buddhist divas, who are then worshipped in the mantras as the heavenly beings and the protectors of Buddhist dharma. However, the cases of transliteration from Chinese to Japanese and the mixed attribution over the multiple divas and Shintō goddesses indicate that the symbolic power of Benzaiten is practical and embodied rather than canonical. This

¹ According to the ancient records of the 8th Century *Kojiki*, Toyotamahime gave a pair of magical orbs to her lover Howorinomikoto, who happened to visit her palace on the seabed in search of a lost hook that he borrowed from his reluctant older brother. The hook was found in the mouth of a red sea bream but his brother was furious with his brother and conflict ensued. The younger brother finally fought off his brother’s attacks by turning the tide against him. The name *toyo* (prosperous), *tama* (orb) and *hime* (woman/maiden/princess) come from this episode.

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embodying power enables Benzaiten and her worshippers to become an aquapelagic assemblage in coordinating the waters, language, music, prosperity and fishery as well as any related activity, sentiment and places.

Around the coastal region of Shimokita Peninsula, the rituals associated with Benzaiten are mostly conducted by men. But women also play a crucial part in preparing for the *naorai* gathering as well as other communal matters that need to be taken care of in order for the Benten-sai to occur. The Yagoshi Benten-sai is a communally coordinated event in which the participants, being committed to and resonating with the performance, become the assemblage that manifests Benten. The participants experience the assemblage of becoming Benten by means of the festival, consisting of music, dance, food and the maritime ritual. In the ritual and feast, the otherwise unremarkable rock known as Sakurajima becomes the sacred space of the enshrined goddess. The ritual makes the island a territorial space *enacted on* the rock, as the island itself *performs*. On the island dedicatory food is shared and *kagura* is performed as an offering, and the space of the performance becomes an island. Whatever the extent of the participants' awareness of the historical complexity of the goddess, the performative space expands into an island as it resonates and finally envelops the entire community into a singular *shima*.

The Aquapelagic Assemblage, *Khôra*, and Performance

The concept of the aquapelagic assemblage has been discussed in this journal for some years as a means to expand the scope of Island Cultural Studies (Hayward 2012a, 2012b). Maxwell (2012) invoked Derrida's (1993) concept of the *khôra*² in this context. *Khôra* is where the material that is an assemblage takes form. The aquapelagic assemblage is *khôra* and vice versa since the latter cannot be void but, rather, its receptiveness makes it an event that (literally) *takes place* and eventually becomes inseparable from it. Water reality, land reality and island reality, along with various conditions of their combination, become an expression of materiality. *Khôra* is another name for an assemblage in that any given condition, specific timing and spacing become an event or the real. This parallels what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the "pincers" of signification after Hjemslev's semiotics, which make up a space by partaking in interactions between two sets of pincers: content and expression, and form and substance (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). Hjemslev's pincers are, in this regard, an explication of *khôra* (at least in some regards) since they extract a space where any activity can take place. If an island is an expression of culture (eg the environment on material plane), and ideas can be the contents of island (eg a subsistence economy), these two cannot be placed under a single paradigm but are, rather, a particular strata forming an assemblage. Here, the island as assemblage - wherein island and ideas become inclusively *another* island - is *khôra* since exclusion and participation are a void to be discerned within, an incessant giving and becoming always take place to form the very space of interaction. *Khôra* cannot be a *tabula rasa* awaiting its contents to be filled, like a container, but is, rather, a space which becomes void without a performance.³

It has to be noted that the aquapelagic assemblage is essentially effectual and in this very sense islands are a becoming. Hayward has identified that the establishment of the Gwail

² This derives from the Greek notion of the *khôra* as the portion of the polis outside of the central space of the city.

³ Another possibility is to compare *khôra* with the Japanese concept *ba*, loosely translated as 'place-ness', which needs more space to be discussed thoroughly.

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Haanas National Park Reserve in the Haida Gwaii islands off the northern coast of British Columbia:

1) ...attempts to protect aggregated island/marine environments from further degradation; and 2) to conceive of and legally encapsulate the complex relationship between humans and other animate and inanimate actants in integrated terrestrial and marine spaces. (Hayward 2012b: 12).

Islands and waters are not a mere container or 'ground' for the conservation activity, nor are they even an object of it. They are not components of the scheme but an assemblage that envelops the actants being activated by the scheme. The incorporation of culture and environment form a reality, a conservation assemblage. In the course of the event, becoming-minority, or becoming-Haida, may also assembled. The true importance of considering assemblage is to get away from rather sterile presumptions regarding identity based on social roles. In aquapelagic assemblages, human activity needs to be seen as making of inseparable human-with-X, a becoming: a human-salmon, a human-racoon-bylaw, a human-pine-rock-pond-dance, and so forth. It is worth seeking a parallel at this point. Ni-Vanuatu women's liquid percussion ensembles provide another intriguing case by dint of reminding us that assemblages are essentially performative (Hayward, 2014; Dick, 2015). In Vanuatu, aquapelagic assemblages are realised by female Banks Islander ensembles that realise aquapelagos in which the sound of water, the sea territory, the land, the sense of tradition (or even tourism and cultural policy) can enter into performative reality. The concept of aquapelagic assemblage can, therefore, bring issues regarding performance space into perspective, and it can constitute a study of art with a new direction.

Focusing on artistic inclination in Island Cultural Studies is not mere parochialism. Conversely, art is the most notable of all effectual acts in the making of aquapelagic assemblages and must occupy a crucial place in their study. I tentatively refer to this concept as "festival-performance" to specify the art effect in any given performative act. Festival-performance can include anything from religious ritual in the most ascetic sanctuary to a dinner show in a tourist facility, or can consist of installations and exhibitions. These are, by nature, effectual (as in the vicinity of an event in which transfiguration of subjects occurs) and the space of the festival-performative is an assembled one. In such moments of becoming, *khôra* becomes visible as an environment. As the festival-performance is an assemblage of music, dancing and acting (as well as any intercorporeality occurring in its vicinity of an event), to scrutinise festival-performance means to visualise and envisage *khôra*. It is an assemblage by resonance, vibration or by the gaze penetrating through the space which can be effectually observed in interaction and intercorporeality. Island becomes real as a result of a magical relationship between the volition and action influencing the material plane. Festival performance is therefore a *modus operandi* of magical reality.

Background

Shimokita Peninsula separates Mutsu Bay, the Tsugaru Strait and the Pacific Ocean. The shape of the peninsula resembles a raised axe, as it appears as a large peninsular 'almost island' thrusting northward from the northern end of Honshu (Figure 1). The blade of the axe is the rocky fringe of the sacred and otherworldly Osorezan caldera, as its coastline directly rises to 200-400m high within less than a kilometre from the crystal-clear sea. Its

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vegetation is dense and rich in variety from maritime to alpine; in terms of fauna, it is known as the world's northernmost habitat of the macaque.

Sai Village stretches along the western coast of the Shimokita Peninsula and consists of nine residential districts. The majority of the districts comprise unpopulated rocky bushlands and cliffs. Flat land is so scarce that the area's traditional settlements were built along narrow river banks and the cliffy coastline connected by narrow winding roads. The main districts of Sai were developed as ports in the 17th Century. These ports were connected to surrounding waters as part of large trade system involving Ryukyu, Japan, the Ainu homeland of Hokkaido, Manchuria (via the Amur), Okhotsk and Kamchatka. Furs, kelp, salmon, rice, and Japanese and Manchurian silk brocades were traded. The downtown areas were originally settled by merchants, labourers, artisans and Shugendō religious practitioners. Judging from the old majestic Buddhist temples downtown, Sai seems to have been an important commercial port region under the protection of the Nanbu-Morioka Domain. In modern times, even the smaller ports prospered through abundant catches of herrings and sardines as well as shipping out white cedar logs hauled from their hinterlands. The village has faced depopulation in recent years however. Its population currently numbers roughly 2,000, which is half of the number in 1970, and is still decreasing (Sai Mura webpage).



Figure 1 – The Shimokita Peninsula (tagged) on the south side of the straits between Honshu and the northerly island of Hokkaido (courtesy of Google Maps)

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Yagoshi District consists of sixty-five households in five subgroups. In 1975, as a result of a disaster caused by unusually high tides, the District abandoned the main settlement, a fishing community by the sea, and relocated to a bushland area of the adjacent Ōzai District, where a street plan was developed and a community hall was built as the new centre of the district. But the location of communal rituals and gatherings did not change after the new centre was developed. There are sixteen rituals and festivals conducted annually, all of which include a performance of the Yagoshi *kagura* folk dance. In coastal Shimokita the *kagura* is a *shishimai* (lion dance) performed by two men accompanied by an ensemble consisting of flute, drums, cymbals and a male voice. The Yagoshi *kagura* entails a *kadotsuke* (a procession on the street) and a *hōnō* (a musical offering at the shrine). The former is performed on the street for the well-being and purification of every household and the latter is dedicated to the deities in sacred spaces. Although the local *shishimai* has no association with worship of the goddess, it is performed as the *hōnō* ritual in Benten-sai because it is the only sacred dance of Yagoshi known today.

Although little is known about how Benten worship was transmitted around Shimokita, it has been surmised that shipmen and the owners of commercial vessels might have introduced it to wish for safe travel and successful trade. Today, the patrons of Benzaiten are local fishermen from each district. Sai Village Fishery Cooperatives, the official body of the fishermen, has 240 members, including the administrative workers (Sai Village Fishery Cooperatives 2012). Each district has a branch body called a *ryōshikai*. Currently, in Yagoshi the *ryōshikai* consists of seven active fishermen (downsizing and aging are considered to be serious matters since the youngest member is already in his mid-forties). The main catch is flounder, squid, sea urchin and a variety of seaweeds. The Cooperatives control these resources in order for them to be sustainable and marketable.

Despite its traditional appearance, the Yagoshi Benten-sai has a relatively short history: It was conceived in 1973 as a ceremony for the local fishery. The ritual was inspired by the Benten-sai of Kozai District in the main part of Sai Village. Sakurajima rock, in the old fishing port, was chosen as the site for the ritual. Like Bentenjima (formally called Gombejima) in Sai, Sakurajima (literally ‘cherry blossom island’) is now connected to the mainland as part of the fishing port’s breakwater (Figure 2). Despite its name, Sakurajima is a scantily vegetated rock. Since there are hardly any trees in its vicinity, it remains a mystery as to why the rock was given its current name.⁴ The (now connected) island is located in the fishing port only about 15 metres away from the seashore, and is approximately 100 square metres in area and roughly 3 metres above sea level. A small shrine was built on top of the rock in order to facilitate Benten-sai. Because of high tides and gusting winds during the winter, the structure rests on firm foundations and was built with concrete. It is only open to the public on the day of the ceremony.

⁴ *Sangoku Meishō Zue*, originally compiled in 1843, recounts folklore that Kagoshima’s Sakurajima volcanic island was named after the goddess of flowery beauty Konohananosakuyahime (Godai and Hashiguchi, 1982: 906). Her association with the volcano is believed to come from the myth that she gave birth to the twin Howorinomikoto and his enemy-to-be brother in fire. As Howorinomikoto went on to marry Toyotamahime, the two goddesses comprise a family. A legend recounts that Sakurajima erupted from the seabed as Toyotamahime became angry when her true figure as a shark became apparent to her husband as she was giving birth (ibid: 901).

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Figure 2 – Sakurajima (central top left) and its connection to the mainland via the harbour breakwater (courtesy of Google Maps)

The seven fishing ports of Sai village conduct Benten-sai as part of their celebration of the *Umi no Hi* anniversary. In Yagoshi the *goshintai* (a sacred effigy concealed in a cloth) is taken from the shrine or temple to islands as a key part of the ritual by men (with women not being allowed to participate). The spirit of the goddess resides in a wooden *ofuda* (talismanic) amulet, on which her name is handwritten in ink, which is enshrined in the Yagoshi Hachimangū,⁵ the place of worship of the deity Hachiman.⁶ The Yagoshi Benten-sai consists of four parts: a Shintō ceremony in Yagoshi Hachimangū; a parade by a flotilla of fishing boats, a ceremony on Sakurajima, and a final *naorai* banquet at the community hall.⁷ The following account details the components and overall performative operation of the 2015 festival, which the author attended with a group of students from Hiroasaki University.

⁵ The original shrine was built in 1752 as a branch of Yanonemori Hachimangū of Kozai District; the current building was rebuilt in 1907.

⁶ In ancient times Hachiman was the personification of ancestral spirits in Kyushu. In the medieval era, he was worshipped by samurai as the god of victory and shrines were built around Japan. Hachiman is sometimes identified as a Bodhisattva, although today his deity is never clearly identified. His name ('eight flags') derives from the number of flags that were once used to summon his spirit.

⁷ Despite its modern establishment, the origin of Benzaiten worship in Yagoshi may have had a much longer history than might first appear. In 1987, a wooden amulet dated 1864 was discovered in the pavilion of Yagoshi Hachimangū, on which the name of Toyotamahime was written (Yagoshi Chikukai, 2007: 1-2). Some locals speculate that Benzaiten had been previously worshipped in Yagoshi with or without any festival connected to Sakurajima. At any rate, the ground for an aquapelagic assemblage has been always present in Sai since the origin of its communities.

The 2015 Yagoshi Benten-sai

Blessed with fine weather, Yagoshi held their Benten-sai event as scheduled on 20 July 2015. In Yagoshi the *shinji* ceremony started a few minutes earlier than previously announced 9:30am at Hachimangū. Reflecting gender prohibitions (supposedly since the goddess is jealous of young women), my female students went to Kozai, where they were allowed to participate in that village's Benten-sai ceremonies, not returning to Yagoshi until the *naorai* commenced.⁸ A male student stayed in Yagoshi with me to video and photograph the event, with the participants' permission.

When we arrived there were already several private cars in the parking lot in front of the shrine across the road. Twenty attendants, all adults dressed casually, entered the *haiden* (shrine) pavilion and sat down on the tatami floor matting. Iwashimizu, a Shintō priest clad in a ceremonial kimono officiated. He is the keeper of Kozai's Yanonemori Hachimangū but also provides services in unmanned shrines elsewhere in Sai. The priest stands at the end of the small *haiden* with his back to the entrance so that he can face the sacred souls, which are separately kept in a rear shrine called *shinden*. The priest recited the Shintō *norito* chant dedicated to Benzaiten, and the attendants were seated on the floor for about ten minutes and maintained a bowed posture.

Following the *norito* the *kagura* dance is performed as a *hōnō* (dedicatory ritual). The dancers are from the same community but they are not members of *ryōshikai*. The dance is performed to music performed on a *fue* (bamboo flute), a set of two *taiko* (drums) and a pair of small cymbals made of iron. The musicians are not wearing costumes but are casually attired like other attendants. The smaller *taiko* is about 50 centimetres in diameter and the larger one about 1 metre. Two men perform a single male *shishi* dance. The front dancer is wearing the headdress and is hidden under the shroud, while the rear dancer's body is entirely visible. The shroud is a black cloth with a decoration of white swirls to represent body hair. The headdress is curved from wood and painted in black. Its eyes are painted in gold, teeth and fangs in white and red cloth sticks out from its mouth in order to hide the face of the dancer. The *shishi* moves its front arm and head wildly, expressing the animal's temper. The performance takes about 9 minutes.

Yagoshi's *kagura* is stylistically different from that of nearby Kozai village's. While the differences might appear minor to an outsider, the two communities, which are separated by less than two kilometres, regard them as emblematic of their communal distinctness. Yagoshi's *kagura*, for reasons unknown, was adapted from one performed in the Mena District of Higashidōri Village in 1901, an inland community located an hour's drive from Sai (Yagoshi Chikukai 2007: 25). While the music performed in Kozai and Yagoshi is accompanied by the same instrumentation (and same number of dancers) it features different melodies, and in Kozai the two drums are beaten by two players instead of one. Along with the wands and *suzu* (rattles used in both ceremonies, the Yagoshi *shishi* waves a sword which is a magical weapon within the Shugendō faith.⁹ In Yagoshi the rear dancer

⁸ I am unsure as to why the Kozai community let the female students participate. This may have either been because their Benten-sai is no longer strictly gender-oriented, or else they made an exception to accommodate us.

⁹ Shugendō and folk Shintō practitioners related to the Ise Jingū shrine are believed to be the original performers of the *kagura* art of Sai. Shugendō is a medieval folk religion related to native mountain worship, Tao, and esoteric Buddhist sects. Both Shugendō and folk Shintō disciples performed dances

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shows his face while in Kozai the both dancers are hidden under the shroud. To the local people, such differences of performative style indicate the identity of community. Although the dances must have changed over generations, the people in Sai make a great deal of effort to keep (and, to a lesser extent, remodel) their own *kagura* in the name of tradition.

Around 10am the *shinji* at Yanonemori Hachimangū is over. The participants take the five-minute walk down the hill in single file. Bente's *goshintai* is loaded on to a pickup truck to be transferred to the leading fishing boat waiting at the wharf, which also has the priest onboard. The *kagura* musicians get in a separate boat to perform their music, and the second part of the *shinji* is then conducted at sea. The Yagoshi fishing boats, the masts of which are decorated with colourful *tairyōki* flags, form a line as they depart the wharf, and we followed the parade in our dingy. As the boats leave the wharf, the coast of Yagoshi shows its looming cliffs rising from the deep blue sea. The flotilla slowly parades Bente's *goshintai* around its traditional territory despite Sakurajima being just one kilometre from the wharf. Offshore, about 200 metres from the port, the vessel stops to commence the *shinji* on the water. As the *kagura* is played (without the dancers), a packet kept unseen and wrapped in white cloth is thrown into the sea as the *norito* prayer is chanted (although that it is not audible on other boats). The packet contains a wooden *ofuda* amulet in a box that is dropped into the sea as an offering to the goddess. A bottle of *omiki* (sacred sake) is also poured into the sea as an offering. After a couple of hours, the flotilla vacates the communal territory of waters and slowly returns to the shore. The entire distance covered is roughly two kilometres.



Figure 3 – The ritual at sea (author's photograph, 2015)

After the boats return to the harbour, a procession walks along the breakwater to Sakurajima. A *hokora* (small shrine) built for Bente sits on top of the rock. People who did not participate in the parade wait for the others to arrive, making a fire to broil scallops. The priest climbs up the rock, opens the door of the *hokora* and places the *goshintai* inside.

as part of magical rituals and community entertainments but were discouraged after 1871 due to national religious policies.

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As the *norito* is chanted, members of the *ryōshikai* and *kagura* dancers pay respect in front of *hokora*, one by one. The *shishimai* is performed in front of the shrine as *hōnō*. As the dance ends, the *shinji* is taken over by the *naorai*. Visitors, who are excluded from Sakurajima during the ritual, are then invited on to the rock to join the company, which has already started to drink, sitting down on the flat surface of the rock. Cooked scallops and *hoya* (sea-pineapple¹⁰) sashimi are offered with a ritual cup of sake followed by cans of beer and cocktails. A very small portion of *sekihan* (steamed sweet rice with red beans) and *shitogi* (paste made from rice powder) are consumed ritually, served onto the hands of the participants and immediately eaten, as the food is understood to be a reciprocal gift from Benten to ensure prosperity.



Figure 4 – A *nagame* of Sakurajima and Yagoshi from the sea (author's photograph, 2015)

On Sakurajima, casual conversation is exchanged after the ceremony, mostly giving general impressions about this year's ritual. A flautist in his sixties offers us the *hoya* and drink, and asks us about our impressions of the *naorai*. I casually mentioned that the taste of *hoya* surpasses the ones from the supermarket. With a gesture of appreciation, he replies in a strong affirmation:

Yeah, the hoyo! They do taste different here. What's important is that it is eaten on this place. On the land, even the same ones wouldn't taste as good as in here. I mean this is an outdoor open space out here. Just because we gather up here, we get a special taste for them: the view, sea, wind, the sun and all.

¹⁰ *Maboya*. *Halocynthia roretzi*. Commonly eaten in northern coastal Japan and less commonly in maritime Korea.



Figure 5 - Benzaiten's *hokora* on Sakurajima: The priest (left) conducts the *shinji* (author's photograph, 2015)

Around noon, the *naorai* is over. The priest, Iwashimizu, has departed to another district's Benten-sai *shinji*. The men have left to put away the gear and restore Benten's *goshintai*, the *kagura* headdress and musical instruments. The *shukugakai* ceremony is scheduled at 14:00 at the community hall (to which women are invited) before concluding with the *naorai*. We then depart to Kozai, to see Sai Benten-sai performed at the port, about a three-minute drive away from Sakurajima.

Arriving in Kozai, the Benten-sai is almost over. The small *goshintai* shrine that had been paraded on the sea has just returned to the ferry port. The shrine is carried down from the fishing boat by about a dozen men followed by me and my students, on a short procession to Chōfukuji Temple, where the statue of their Benten rests. I have been acquainted with the men from the Sai Kagura group for just over a year. During the ten-minute walk we exchange words, since this procession does not bear as great a religious significance as the rest of the ritual. Hearing that I am taking my students to Yagoshi for the field research class, they ask me in curiosity: "They really do it their own way, don't they? What was it like? I've never seen it elsewhere because we do ours on the same Sea Day." We are kindly invited to the *naorai*, which is catered with lunch boxes, at the *Kyōsaikai* (youth group) meeting house. Although the Bentensai is patronised by the fishermen, the *ryōshikai* is not represented there since the *shinji* ritual was going to be called off in the morning due to forecast of an approaching typhoon (which did not eventuate). As a result, the *kyōsaikai* had prepared their own meal. The *ryōshikai* also set up a reception at their own site, the Fishery Cooperative office by the port, to reward the *kyōsaikai*.

The community centre of Yagoshi is located in the new settlement up on the hill, about a fifteen-minute walk from the Hachimangū and a ten-minute walk from Sakurajima. In the community centre, a reception called *shukugakai* is held that the women's chapter of the District and workers from the Sai Fishery Cooperative also participate in. Sets of appetizers are provided but food and drink seem to have less religious significance than for the *naorai*

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and the *shinji* on Sakurajima. Indeed, the *shukugakai* is the fun part of the Benten-sai. Greetings and speeches from village functionaries and other guests, including us, are made. In the *shukugakai*, the Yagoshi women, who are virtually invisible in the *shinji* in Hachimangū to Sakurajima, are spotlighted throughout. The most entertaining features of the *shukugakai* are the karaoke singing and comical stunts performed as the afternoon progresses. By then, the participants are feeling relaxed enough to sing and dance. The women put on kimono for traditional dances and then change to idol cosplay for pop dancing. The party ends before sunset and by 6pm Wakamonokai, the District's youth group, clean up the floor, put away the tables, collect and dispose of rubbish and lock the centre building.

There is one aspect that appears to be confusing and which even the locals cannot clarify, namely, where is the divinity Benzaiten? If she stays in the shrine or moves to Sakurajima, why does the vessel go on the water for the chanting? One could presume that the performance is an enactment of the quality of the goddess as Toyotamahime, whose home is under the sea, and Ichikishimahime, whose home is on the island. Still, it is mystifying that her spirit rests in Hachimangū on a regular basis. The answer to such questions seems to involve the effect of enshrinement. The wholeness of Benzaiten, or a reality that the entire district is within her sanctity, is re-enacted in performance that confirms her as a multiple unifying centre of the aquapelagic assemblage. She is not separate from the rest of the world but is the face of the island, the sea and a participant in the festival. Most importantly, by means of performance, Benzaiten becomes an island, and an aquapelago herself.

The Aquapelagic Assemblage as Performative Festival

Yagoshi's Benten-sai is a becoming island event in that Benzaiten and her domain are enacted and realised in performance. Firstly, in aquapelagic assemblages islands resonate with each other. Sakurajima is imagined (and thereby brought into being) as an island resonating with Benten sanctuaries in other districts. The unimposing rocky islet of Sakurajima is chosen to be an island and becomes Bentenjima, the territory of Benzaiten, once a year. The flotilla, food and *kagura* are not only the *modus operandi* for making the island's *shima* a reality but are also, by themselves, part of the phenomenon of becoming island. The music, dance and food represent the desire for and of the island. By means of the Benten festival, Kozai, Yagoshi and the other districts of Sai enable local people to recognise their own *shima* in imagining each other's *shima*. But other Benten-sai are never visible because they are held on the same day and other communities do not try and attend. However, the fact that they know the festivals are held in other districts enables them to imagine each other's communities in a relative sense; they are different but the same in that each other's *shima* is distinct but shares in the assemblage.

In addition, the multiplicity of the events cosmology is certainly an effect of island territoriality. The festivals resonate with each other as the territory of the goddess (literally Benten's *shima*) is extracted on any piece of land. Here, the waters are also key in that the vessels only parade in the district's aquatic territory in the areas where coastal fishing is allowed. On the same day, each district holds its own procession on its waters so that the marine area of their *shima* becomes apparent with its centre located on their Benten's island. As the festival takes place on the same day in the districts, the aquapelagic assemblage of Sai village as a whole becomes apparent as the territories of Benten. In such a way, each district extracts its own micro-cosmology from the fact that Benten's collective

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cosmology is shrouded from each participating community. The subtlety of such consciousness is apparent from a Kozai *kagura* member who asked about Yagoshi Benten-sai: "What was it like? I have never seen how they do theirs because we've got to do ours on the same Sea Day." Here it becomes clear that Benten's territories are being performed as instances within a continuum while each district maintains its own identity with rituals unseen to outsiders. Secrecy is key to the island power, as we, the outsiders, were excluded from the *shinji* on Sakurajima so that the very heart of the island territory remained unseen but imaginable.

The flotilla's parade around Sakurajima and the subsequent ritual enacted on it provide a distinct facet of the assemblage. The gaze forms the aquapelagic assemblage of the waters, Benten, and the landmarks focused on Sakurajima. In other words, gazing is a performative act just as the *shishimai* and ritual are. The view from the boat or, more precisely, the act of viewing, generates the assemblage as the whole landscape of the island in the water and everyday-life reality on the mainland. As the vessel leaves the harbour and sails around, the scenery becomes apparent and eventually an assemblage of directions of the gaze form the territory of Yagoshi. This micro-visual effect of has been traditionally known as *nagame* in Japan (one possible translation of which is 'scenery') but the term also implies the direction of the 'eyebeam' or an actual eye movement that envisages the landscape. The performance of *kagura* on Sakurajima has precisely the same effect as *nagame* in terms of the view from the sea, as the rock rises from the waters so that the participants get to see its surroundings. In addition, in terms of subjectivity, it is Benzaiten who allows the participants to commit to the act of *nagame* - by means of sinking the amulet and through the chant and the dedicatory *kagura* on the island. The *kagura* music and dance, or even the sound of the wind, are not necessarily synaesthetic with the *nagame* (at least in the sense that they never coordinate as a singular ritual act) but even if they are experienced as separate fragments they still form an assemblage.

The singularity of the ritual is sensed by the entire context of the performative event, making the aquapelagic assemblage of Benzaiten become a communal reality. In particular, the transient and ephemeral nature of the experience of gathering is interestingly expressed in the statement on the taste of *hoya* sashimi on Sakurajima: "Just because we gather up here, we get a special taste for them: The view, sea, wind, sun and all." The implication of this remark is that it is crucial for the food to be consumed in the *naorai* order to make the ritual experience singular and therefore irreplaceable. Even in the annual ritual of Benten-sai, the memory of the food tasted each time on the island is singular. Senses of the difference and irreplaceability of the goddess's sanctuary makes the island performative. This singularity of experience embedded in performance as an ephemeral element is precisely that which makes it sustainable. The annual appearance of Benzaiten does not so much mark the year but rather makes the space fundamentality performative through the ephemeral nature of sensory perception. The consumption of food on Sakurajima is indispensable for activating the aquapelagic assemblage. It is not only that this consumption is a performative action but also that the taste of the food - in this case, the sashimi *hoya* - makes the action performative. As a performative event, the aquapelagic assemblage is singular in its occurrence.

Benzaiten crystallises sustainability, island, sound, music and dance in distinct manner. Her islandness is constantly in motion, whether on the sea, on the island or in her shrine. The prosperity that she brings is not necessarily that understood in a modern capitalist sense but rather refers to the sustainable life of the community. In fact, in Japan it is generally conceived that the divinities become manifest through music and dance in a

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manner that has been conceptualised by Orikuchi (2002) as *tamafuri* (literally a process of 'spirit-shaking') through touches that embody spirits that are otherwise thought to be ephemeral (Suwa 2015). At this point it would be misleading to identify Benzaiten simply as an example of syncretism or as personified water, or even as simply being a female goddess since it is the performative acts of sinking the amulet, eating on the rock, dance and music, etc that 'shake' the spirit. At this moment, the spirit no longer remains as the individual life-power of Benzaiten but is shared intercorporeally among the (living or non-living) participants via 'spirit-shaking'. The *tama*, as a consequence, inspirits in communal personhood, waters and rocks, and taste of food alike, without a boundary. By means of performance, it is activated by and resonates in the music and dance and is simultaneously shared. Precisely at this moment, personhood becomes island. The island as a particular time-space is sensible and therefore performative. The spirit of the Benzaiten connects the world of water with the land, and Sakurajima mediates them with the music and dance.

Finally, whereas music, dance, *nagame*, *tamafuri* and the taste of food are altogether essential to Benten-sai, the aquapelagic assemblage is the performative core of senses and imaginations. The transfiguration of Benten is an assemblage between the island and the live event in which the conventional boundary between the two loses distinction. The assemblage is performative, and being territorial is to be performative as well, all of which is embodied in Benzaiten. The power of aquapelagic assemblage is the rebirth of the island, or rebirth of the commons. These islands in performance are *shima*, especially in that they are fractal (Suwa 2007). As Shimokita, Sai and each district take form nesting with each other, they are islands within islands being activated recursively in performance. Any time the performance takes place in the present, Benten-sai generates another *shima* – Sakurajima is performed by activating by the dance and sound of music offered to Benzaiten.

Conclusion

Benzaiten is a powerful and robust divinity, who articulates imagined waters to generate a reality that incorporates waters lying between lands. Without music and dance performance the assemblage of the island never generates. The true fecundity, therefore, lies in the deep and associative power of performative imaginations. Benzaiten generates and attracts non-linear and territorial historicity (at times, even anti-historical for she is a goddess but simultaneously is an effect of territorial divinity in her own way). By the same token, Yagoshi becomes its waters through imagining communal space centred on Sakurajima in the name of Benzaiten. Yagoshi's Benten-sai is a place-hood, a *khôra* of sound-movement, making an island an apprehensible reality in performance as well as an insignia of the goddess - the recursive and manifold becoming-island of Benzaiten, Sakurajima and the communal territories.

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