Contemporary Realities and Future Dreams of Oki Islands Youth

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Abstract

This paper explores young people's reflections on their native island community and on its position in their personal future plans and dreams. Based on narratives and perspectives of a group of local senior high school students in Oki Islands, the paper examines the changing nature of youth identities and cultural values in a rural region in post-industrial Japan. This article argues that the (peripheral) islandic viewpoint contributes to a better understanding of the dialectic local/global interplay influencing young people's everyday life practices and education and working career preferences in contemporary Japan. Furthermore, the article demonstrates how young people use their home—social and cultural constructions of their islands as place—as anchoring point when navigating transitions in the context of traditional expectations and (late) modern ambitions. Young people critically rethink—beyond typical presentations of rural/urban dichotomies—the structures of opportunities in local contextualities. Employing theoretical work on reflexive modernity, the article provides a legitimate way of understanding why young people's future thoughts and dreams matter.

Keywords: young people, future, identity, island community, reflexive modernity, Japan.

Introduction

For most of the post-World War II era rural youth has simply been presented as the future industrial-worker of the cities, most notably in Tokyo, Osaka and other large urban centres in mainland Japan (Inui 2003). The countryside served as the country's abundant workforce reserve, supplying the booming industries with a steady stream of skilled and committed manpower. Rural youth left home without much hesitation, considering it a duty more than the subject of personal choice, and was smoothly immersed in the employers' comprehensive services for staff (Brinton 2000). The future lay in the cities, symbolising unprecedented material wealth and personal freedom, as well as contact to alluring western lifestyles. Oki Islands, a community with a population of 24.000 inhabitants, located in the Sea of Japan some 60 kilometres from the mainland, was no exception. Young people in large numbers were persuaded to cross the sea in the quest for a secure income and a (foreseeable) conformity-oriented life path (Toivonen et al. 2011, p.8). Young islanders, indeed, were also (actually, still are) looking for well-paid work offshore —as part of fishing vessel or freighter crews operating all over the world. Real islands, in contrast to so-called inland-islands, as some sociologists label the inner non-urban periphery, often have a long history of in/out migration, as in the case of Oki Islands, and hence seem to be slightly better prepared for periods of recession and depopulation than other outlying areas (Mock 2014). In the 1990s, when the longstanding economic growth finally came to a standstill in Japan, a stagnation that has persisted until now, many people started looking back to the islands that they had left many years ago asking: shall I stay here or shall I return? Big cities are still strong magnets pulling young people away from shrinking rural regions, but outlooks for urban life have generally turned darker (Furlong 2008; Norasakkunkit and Uchida 2012). Recent research on the national crisis in 'beyond growth' Japan elucidates the complex challenges facing young people and young adults in, first and foremost, post-industrial urban communities (Matanle and Sato 2010). The spectacular *hikikomori* phenomenon (young people withdrawing from social life and

without relationships outside of the family house for long periods of time), for instance, widely discussed among scholars and politicians, is, according to Furlong (2008, p.323), to be explained with the rapid and dramatic 'collapse of traditional structures of opportunities' in mind. Transitions, he says, have all of a sudden 'become precarious and open to reflexive negotiation' (2008, p.322). Other young people, feeling alienated in postmodern society, vanish in social isolation—for instance as so-called *Otaku* considered poor at establishing personal relationships (Tsuboi 1998)—or escape into the universe of subculture—for instance *Kogyaru* and *Otaku*—in a desperate attempt to stay in the 'world of dreams and fantasies' of children (Keliyan 2011, p.109). These and other groups of predominantly urban young people, sometimes labelled cultural dropouts, deviate from what used to be the 'normative path to adulthood and success' (Norasakkunkit and Uchida 2012). They dream, so to speak, of an alternative to current society 'run by old men, for old men' (Lehmann 2002). In ongoing social and moral discourse on assumed predicaments of late adolescence and emerging adulthood in Japan, the so-called parasite-singles, not leaving the nest (i.e., parents' house), are commonly targeted as one of the key impediments (Tran 2006). Moreover, the interest in good jobs in the manufacturing industries has diminished as today many Japanese girls and boys consider them to be less attractive than a range of relatively unsecure service sector jobs (Brinton 2000, p.301). These and other changes related to the reformed labour market, for instance the growing attention on freeters (people relying on temporary, freelance or part-time work) and NEET (young people who have withdrawn—temporary—from the labour market), have not gone unnoticed by Oki Islands youth ready to set sail for the mainland's normally promising cities (Furlong 2008). They are aware of the new uncertainties in the prolonged individualised transition from adolescence to adulthood, and from school to work (Inui 2003, p.222). While the older generations in Oki Islands have retained the bright image of the city as a place of fast growth and practically unlimited opportunities, young people have adjusted their conceptions of urban life and work to the new circumstances. They are still the subject of strong 'degreeocratic' pressure from parents and teachers warning against ordinary lowered academic ambitions; however, most young people have detected the standard transition model's weakened, or at least changed, position in society (Inui 2003, p.224). In Oki Islands, first and foremost in Ama-Town (Nakanoshima Island), the home of the nationally acclaimed Oki Dozen Senior High School, local youth meet youth from other parts of Japan, including youth from the cool mainland cities, and thus get a taste of what awaits when they most likely move away from home in the near future. The dynamic social interaction of everyday life, above all at school, connecting urban and rural youth already before the forthcoming migration to urban centres, motivates boys and girls from Oki Islands to reflect critically on their own community: what do we have that the cities are bereft off? This paper, looking at youth from Oki Islands on the threshold of a life as, more or less, independent adults in a globalising society, investigates how their local identities resonate with their social construction of the islands (home) as well as their future perspectives. What they tell is, in brief, that their islands, contrary to common myths of modernisation, are important, even increasingly so, in the quest of 'fixing the flow' in the 'ongoing flux of globalisation process' (Meyer and Geschiere 1999, p.7). The islands represent their anchor in the form of locality-based 'collective identities' (Paulgaard 2002, p.95-96). In light of this, young people imagine the future in scenarios mirroring different local/global structures of opportunities and different individual/collective priorities.

Method and theory

Method

This study is based on empirical material composed of semi-structured qualitative (individual and group) interviews and a small questionnaire survey distributed to six different classes on all levels (first, second and third year students) at Oki Dozen Senior High School in Ama-Town (Nakanoshima Island) in October 2015. All participants were verbally introduced to the project's aim and framework. The interviews with high school students were carried out at the school library, at the male students' dormitory, and at the Learning Centre (cram school) in Ama-Town. The group interviews lasted 20-40 minutes and were composed of two, three or four students. The students were available for interviews when they had breaks from school-related duties, mostly in the afternoon and early evening. The interviewees (research participants) were local as well as mainland students of both sexes. This article is primarily based on the material from the paper-form questionnaire with eight open-ended questions on the students' perspectives on the school, the Oki Islands, migration, (higher) education, and their future. I divided the collection of completed questionnaires, putting the local students' answers on one side of the table and all of the

others on the other side. This article focuses, as mentioned, on the local youth from one of the four inhabited Oki Islands (most of which were from one of the three Dozen Islands, because the fourth and biggest island, Dōgo, has two own senior high schools). Some of the other students, nevertheless, had families originating from Oki, even if they themselves had been living in mainland Japan for their whole life. Even if many students had simple English language skills, it was not possible to communicate fluently and spontaneously without the help of an interpreter. Unfortunately, I do not master Japanese myself—indeed a methodological limitation for my ethnographic work in Oki Islands—and therefore had to rely upon proficient bilingual assistants. The filled out questionnaires were translated from Japanese to English by my former colleague, Dr. Mayumi Takahashi at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. My linguistic limitations, logically, also restricted my access to Japanese academic literature. The questionnaires, 126 in total, were filled out individually and anonymously during school hours; they were then collected in large envelopes—one for each class—and promptly handed over to me. The students, aged 15-18 at the time of the fieldwork, were not forced to fill out the questionnaire, some of them deciding to leave the sheets blank. Except for the empirical material collected directly from the young participants, my visit to the Oki Islands also gave the opportunity to talk to teachers, librarians, researchers, and other interesting people willing to share their experiences and knowledge about life on the islands with me. Most of them were based in Ama-Town, which has become famous throughout Japan since media started to tell the uplifting story of 'the town that's battling the demographic tide' (Quarshie 2014) and that 'shows it can win the fight against decline' (Shigeki 2015) by 'enriching its educational offerings to bring young people back' (Mimikuza 2009). Most of them were so-called I-Turners, a puzzling Japanese migration discourse term embracing any incoming citizen without prior experience from his new home. I-Turners are not coming back to familiar places after years in mainland exile, and this constitutes the essential difference between them and the usual U-Turners. They came to Ama-Town to be part of a community fighting tooth and nail to prevent the local high school, which symbolised the future of the island, from closing down (Quarshie 2014). My decision to do fieldwork in Ama-Town (Nakanoshima Island), instead of focusing on another of the vast number of relatively remote Japanese islands, was strongly influenced by the energetic town's interesting and ambitious project of 'maintaining and sharing a community's local identity while embracing globalisation' (Quarshie and Nanka 2015, p.20).

Theory

Giddens pivotal book *Modernity and Self-Identity*, already 25 years since release, starts with a discussion on a book called *Second Chances* about divorce and remarriage (Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1989), which, he says, is 'part of the *reflexivity* of modernity' (original italics) urging us to seek answers to the 'how shall I live' question in day-to-day decisions constituting a transitory self-identity—an identity project based on individual processual reflection on own biography—characterised by own responsibility and risk management (Giddens 1991, p.14-15). The second chance as a kind of conclusive last chance in case of failure at first attempt, an institutional recognition of human imperfection in complex ever-changing contexts, indicates, somehow, a fixed and limited repertoire of alternatives, while, according to Giddens, the selection of possible worlds in reflexive life planning is practically unlimited (1991, p.5). Everyday life choices, rather than (second) chances easily giving the wrong impression of being unconditional gifts, are based on trust relations and subjective sense of ontological security, Giddens argues, but also, inevitably, on risk assessment along with feelings of doubt and apprehension. Interestingly, looking ahead, critically reflecting on an imagined future, people will often deal—present time—with contrafactual possibilities as part of their evaluation of risk in case things had not gone the way they did: what if? (1991, p.29). What appeared as new to young Europeans' everyday lives in the 1980s and 1990s, leading to new lifestyles and cultural values, has striking resemblance to what many young people in Japan experience today (Furlong 2008). In education, which more than anything else has defined youth as youth in Japan, the second chance was, at least until recently, practically non-existent (Inui 2003). There was, in principle, only one chance (the one-shot opportunity) for each student to get smooth transition from further education/training to permanent job in the core labour market (Norasakkunkik et al. 2012, p.363). If unsuccessful, the person would be doomed to second-class citizen life forever (ibid.). Today, with change connected to globalisation processes as one of society's main features, the golden past (the growth era) does not maintain high position among young people counting on a larger 'range of acceptable life goals' and a societal support for 'more diverse values' (Norasakkunkik et al. 2012, p.374). According to Giddens, time and space are being disembedded—lifted out of their local context—in the era of global modernisation, a theoretical position outlining (geographical) place—where you live—as a relative component to be 'rearticulated across indefinite traces of time-space' (Paulgaard 2002, p.95). Identity and belonging, he adamantly upholds, are no longer associated with place, an attribute of late

modernity apparently leading to 'virtually unlimited freedom' (ibid.), but does this not represent an overstatement overlooking the social realities of young people's everyday life in rural and other communities? Beck, analysing new space/time dynamics from a critical perspective without the presupposition of tradition's total disappearance from contemporary (modern) social life, emphasizes that today's sphere of experience is glocal, because, as he says, it has become 'a synthesis of home and non-place, a nowhere place' (Beck 2002, p.31). The ties of culture to place, he argues, are eased and transformed, and, consequently, many young people experience the opening of new choices—new chances—in a wider range of opportunities, a situation commonly producing, says Bauman (1991), the feeling of ambivalence and ambiguity. Young people in Oki, therefore, negotiate their identities between tradition and modernity, between rural and urban structures of opportunities and values, and are, as most of their contemporaries elsewhere, used to 'think beyond borders and to cross them frequently' (Urry 2007). For Oki Islands youth the reflections on identity and on the future are based on personal decisions on leaving or not leaving the place, on returning back home after planned city life, and on, basically, what kind of life aspirations and goals the youth, individually, is motivated by. The reflections are, partly, contesting the norm of urban life as a construction of a binary contrast to traditional rural life. As Fabiansson says in an Australian study,

> young people increasingly need to leave rural areas during their late teenage years and early 20s to seek further education and employment opportunities, their retention within the home community is key to the survival of rural communities (2015, p.86).

Place continues to have an important meaning-making role in young people's everyday lives. Even in late modern society, says Tolonen (2005, p.344), young people are 'surrounded by different social and cultural contexts—they live and learn somewhere with somebody'. So, in essence, young people do not have the one chance (or fatalistic one shot), determining the whole of their future, nor do they have, as could be assumed from the point of Giddens' (high) modernity theory, an endless range of free choices available, because, as for instance Furlong and Cartmel (1997) stress, young people are tied to the local context of everyday life. Local structures, Wall and Olofsson (2008, p.435) argue in accordance with Furlong and Cartmel, restrain young people's opportunities. Place matters, and it is imperative to look at their relation to place (home), if the ambition is to understand how young people comprehend their practices and of their aspirations. There are, indeed, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, p.28) claim, clear differences between urban and rural regions, 'which are empirically demonstrable with regards [...] to lifestyle and family structure', but how are we to explain the meaning of these and other dissimilarities for young people's glocal strategies? Let us take a closer look at Oki now.

Discussion

Ama-Town's high school

Oki Islands is a district within the prefecture of Shimane with 16 named islands, of which only the four largest are permanently inhabited. Nakanoshima (2,600 inhabitants), Nishinoshima (3,900 inhabitants) and Chiburijima (800 inhabitants) constitute Dozen, a bundle of three islands only separated by narrow straits of water. Before the shift around ten years ago, mass migration to the mainland combined with low birth-rates had led to sever population decline in Ama-Town (Nakanoshima), but coordinated efforts—spearheaded by the Miryoku project (Miryoku means charm or attractiveness) from 2007—to restructure the local economy and educational system, strongly influenced upcoming events (Mimizuka 2009). The aim of the project was, in brief, to convince students to choose careers benefitting the islands' sustainability (Quarshie 2014). Oki Dozen Senior High School in Ama-Town looks like any other school when you observe the white concrete building and its classrooms and corridors, but it is a bit different when you check the curriculum and the teaching methods. It is an educational institution with close links to other (rural and urban) parts of Japan, as well as to international educational networks. More than one third of the student population is from other parts of Japan. When I visited Oki, for instance, many 2nd grade students were on the threshold of an exciting study trip to Singapore, a tour representing many students' (especially local Oki students') first travel out of the country. Talking to young people at the high school I noticed that many boys and girls from Dozen are not very interested in leaving home and settle elsewhere, but they are indeed closely influenced by the outside world through youth culture and media. Many girls, for instance, spent time at the high school library looking at photos of glittering fashion/lifestyle magazines with the latest trends from Tokyo high life. There are

interesting differences between local and mainland senior high school students. Mainland students, a young teacher (I-Turner) told me, are all the time engaged in competition for best results among themselves, while Oki students, generally, support each other at school. Mainland students, she added, are more ambitious academically, but at the same time also more fragile than local students who, though, are very patient and don't give up easily. Approximately half of the students graduating from the high school in Ama-Town continue with higher academic education at universities in mainland Japan.

Table 1: Ama-Town (Nakanoshima Island) 2010

Total population (2010)	2.374
0-14 yrs. old	249
15-64 yrs. old	1.201
65 yrs. and older	924
Foreign residents	9
Live births	16
Deaths	38
In-migration	156
Out-migration	95
Households	1.052
Marriages	8
Divorces	3

Japan Statistics

Even if Oki might seem like a peaceful hidden place where nothing important ever has happened, persons digging into the islands' history will unearth a volcano. In *Ancient Tales of Folk-lore of Japan* (1918) Oki is presented with this introduction:

> The Oki Islands, some forty-five miles from the mainland of Hoki Province, were for centuries the scene of strife, of sorrow, and of banishment, but today they are fairly prosperous and highly peaceful [...] They are a weird, wild and rocky group, difficult to access, and few indeed are the Europeans who have visited them (Smith 1918).

Young people's narratives and perspectives

The nature is a recurrent theme in local boys' and girls' answers to what they appreciate most about the Oki Islands: the sea, the beaches, the cliffs, and the magnificent vista. Activities and traditions related to the nature are also emphasized by many participants—for instance fishing and camping, marine sports and festivals—characterising their place as unspoiled and authentic. The appreciation for the nature is in many cases accompanied with a genuine admiration of the people of the islands: their kindness and warmth, their connectedness and unity. Local food—especially the outstanding seafood—is also something many young people, reflecting on the positive features of their faraway place, esteem. A 15-year-old girl illustrates the night sky in this poetic description:

> Night sky (when you are on the ferry, Isokaze, in the evening, the surface of the water glitters due to the planktons. When you look up the sky, there are a lot of stars. When fishing boats are out in the sea in the evening, you can see the nice gradation in the mountain).

These timeless qualities, constructing Oki as a different and strange place in Japan, were also invigorated and exoticised through interaction between local youth and (urban) mainland youth situated in Ama-Town. Oki, the novelist David Mitchell underlines, is still unpolluted by 'pachinko, high-rise apartments or junk food joints'; thence, he says, the islands serve as 'antidotes to big-city stress' (Powell 2013). Oki, concludes a travel writer wondering how the exiled emperors' life must have been here, is not the worst place to be extradited to:

> [G]azing around at the forested hillsides glistening in the soft morning sunshine, I couldn't help feeling that, as banishings go, this wouldn't have been such a terrible punishment (Powell 2013).

Nature, obviously, is not just a backdrop in local youth's narratives of their home; it is linked to their sense of belonging and to islandness, a feeling of connectedness to place obscuring 'the sense of time, since the connections to the past feel so omnipresent' (Conkling 2007, p.199). Between man and nature, in this case insular nature, waves the 'veil of culture', says Leslie White (1958 cited by Sahlins 1976, p.5), and man can see nothing 'save through this medium'. This islandness, shaping young people's world-view, is appreciated, but in which sense can it inspire life in other regions and cities? The students in Ama-Town, being at home yet at the same time part of an innovative school aiming to 'foster "glocal" human resources' (Quarshie and Nanka 2015), voice some curious ideas about what others can learn from Oki. 'People *can* live without big shopping centres or convenient stores', a 16-year-old girl points out as something positive to reveal to other communities in Japan. Another girl mentions the 'unique and creative ways of living in an inconvenient environment', mirroring the opinion of many students also focusing on quality of life issues in the context of remote rural communities. The warmth and hospitality of Oki people—their 'patience to live in a place without any recreational facilities' and to use 'imagination to create something from nothing'—is presented as something envied by, predominantly, urban communities today. The islands, says a girl in rebuttal to elegiac accounts of a declining periphery, 'are small, but things work out', echoing her peers' uncontested comments about fruitful 'cooperation and interaction among the people' leading to an 'energetic local community' where everyone can be 'active to do something', despite—or maybe because of—the fact that 'there are no game arcades or big stores here'. People are independent, says a 16-year-old boy, and, another boy adds, they 'greet each other and talk to each other in the street'. The students are, clearly, addressing qualities that often are considered lost and forgotten in postmodern city contexts, but their aim is not to idealise a rustic charm of the periphery, because advantages in one domain are often outweighed by disadvantages in another domain. Oki, says a 17-year-old boy laconically, 'cannot give what he does not have', thus implying, in accordance with many others' judgement, that Oki has 'nothing' to offer other communities. Like a two-edged sword—good things are sometimes also bad, and strong points are also shortcomings—the islands oblige young people to reflect critically on their often ambivalent relation to home.

> An island can be both paradise and prison, both heaven and hell. An island is a contradiction between openness and closure, between roots and routes, which islanders must continually negotiate (Baldacchino 2007, p.165).

The deep-felt love of the islands does not necessarily insinuate commitment to stay in Oki in the future, because, as mentioned already, many young people search for opportunities and life experiences not available at home. Many young people plan to study and work in mainland Japan, at least for a couple of years, before—depending on concrete career opportunities—possibly returning home to Oki. Some young people say that they are 'longing for city life' because, as a 16-year-old girl claims, 'people get bored of life in the islands'. Young people 'seek something new' when 'they get tired of the same environment'. Life, young people in Ama-Town tell me, seems to be easier, funnier and more convenient in large mainland cities where you can have privacy and choose between many different lifestyles. In Oki, they say, there are no attractive jobs and no universities. A 16-year-old girl even declares that she has been 'longing for city life since childhood'. Many young people also express frustration and dissatisfaction over the low salaries and high cost of living in Oki compared to mainland cities. There are 'no convenient stores or big shopping centres here', a distraught 17-year-old girl says, and it 'costs so much to go to the mainland'. These narratives reflect feelings of being isolated and beyond the reach of new exciting parts of youth life mediated through media and popular culture (Tsuboi 1998). The islands 'lack something the mainland has', and inquisitive young people want to be connected to what is hidden behind the horizon. Young people, in Oki as in many other island communities, have a thirst for change, for something new, and do not feel immobilised:

> The islander may be detached from land transport, suggesting that the islander is stranded (on a beach) and immobilised, but the opportunities for movement by water are enormous. It is through this movement, rather than through immobilisation, I would argue, that the islander develops the special sense of being unto an island, distinct from settled land-bound continentals (Olwig 2007, p.181).

While young people openly praise the simple life (with a limited array of modern facilities and services available) of their Oki families, and consider it an essential local identity benchmark, they do not expect it to remain in the future, because young people's cultural values and life goals are in shift. This is not just a question of opening shopping centres, because, as a student soberly states, 'it would not stop people from moving anyway'. Young people would also, says the girl, 'get tired of it'. Such changes might even, ironically, lead to enduring population decline rather

than to growth and rural revitalisation. Many young people consider the traditional peaceful lifestyle as a kind of cultural capital helping them get success elsewhere, rather than a natural choice for own future path of life. Traditional Oki bullfighting, for instance, witnesses a succession crisis today, as the children of bull owners engaged in bull fighting activities do not share the older generation's passion for bulls (Klien 2011, p.106). Even if Ama-Town, with its progressive local community development initiatives and policies, most notably the investment in education (helping local students finding the right career/education after graduation), aspires to offer Oki girls and boys a bright future, 'it is a future more easily assured for young people in metropolitan areas' (Fabiansson 2015, p.86). Looking at the future of the Oki Islands, young people present a broad range of potential scenarios, a sketch exposing the risks and uncertainties embedded in late modern society, but also a prospect mixing personal visions and general forecasts. Young people, on the whole, are not very optimistic regarding the future of their islands, and many express worries that what they like and what they know will disappear, hence only be part of memories of the past. Many young people say that they want the islands to 'stay as they are', as when a 16-year-old boy resolutely says: 'I want to preserve the nature here and not making any unnecessary stuff. When I come back, I want to see something I already know'. Another student, a 17-year-old girl, says along similar lines: 'I want it to stay as it is now, calm and comfortable places, but if nothing happens, things cannot be maintained and will get worse'. At the same time as they appreciate what they see, they realise that something has to happen, if Oki is to survive as habitable community. A 16-year-old girl presents the dilemma in a nutshell:

> [A] The islands will become more active (more people will move in (I-Turners)), and then more stores will be made, and the number of children will increase. [B] It will continue to have more elderly people, and it might become uninhabited islands.

Many young people, articulating ambiguous sentiments towards the role of so-called I-Turners in Oki, are introducing this group of quite creative people as the architect of innovative projects (aiming to reinvigorate the local community), yet also as a menace to traditional lifestyles of the native islanders. 'I want more U-Turners', says a girl, not because I-Turners are unwanted, but rather, she continues, because 'it is more important that people, who were born and grew up here, and learned the tradition and dialect, come back and pass the history to the next generation'. The predicament is that Oki youth moves out and other people move in. Oki youth, so to speak, want Oki to—so far as possible—stay unchanged, but plans its own future to be situated elsewhere. It is a pity, says a wistful 17-year-old girl, 'that interaction among the people has become less active as the number of I-Turners has increased'. There will be fewer local people here in the future, says an 18-year-old boy, 'and the number of I-Turners will increase'. There is an obvious gap between the I-Turners and the local population in Ama-Town. Local people, especially residents who never moved away from Oki, cannot understand why well-educated and relatively wealthy city-dwellers, of which many have extensive working experience from large mainland companies, freely move out to the islands in the periphery. Local people, as a man from Nishinoshima teasingly told me, 'still live in the 1960s' (i.e. they are not aware of the end of Japanese economy's golden era). I-Turners, he underlined, are not ignoring local people in Ama-Town; it is rather the other way round. Many young people, as described above, want things to stay as they are in Oki, to protect the traditional way of life, but the same group of girls and boys also predict that young people will continue to move away—and that few will return home as U-Turners—if nothing fundamental happens. It would be good, says a girl, focusing on the generational gap, if 'there were jobs and events that young people can participate in'. Most students demand more interesting jobs, better housing and accommodation facilities, cheaper commodity prices, and better living conditions in general, as basic prerequisites for a future with Oki as a sustainable community. It is important, says a student, to 'attract not only I-Turners, but also U-Turners'. Most young people want an 'environment where young people can live more comfortably', while, nevertheless, 'keeping the place as it is now'. Oki students feel strongly attached to their islands, but are ambitious and committed to pursue their personal dreams. They do not, though, target a conventional *shimin* (person of the city) life with the (industrial) work and workplace as the core of everyday life, but try to get the best of the rural and urban in one and the same life project. Being an islander

> is a constant process of becoming one by way of moving—whether moving to an island, moving back to an island, or simply removing oneself from the mainlands of the world by never leaving (Vannini 2011, p.257).

What are local students actually planning to do after graduation from Oki Dozen Senior High School? Most are, not

surprisingly, planning to go to university. Some of them want to study at a vocational school or just to find a job. One of the female students says, straightforwardly, that she wants to go to foreign countries. Others just say that they will leave the islands with mainland Japan as destination. A boy from Nishinoshima says that he want to become a fisherman—on his native island—but not before first trying to live in a city in mainland Japan. Most people planning to leave the islands want to go further than to the homely district of Shimane. Shimane is, according to many young people, too close to home (too familiar), and a kind of mainland periphery itself. While many students, naturally, are doubtful about their future, having many different options on their mind, others do have a clear pragmatic mission, like the 17-year-old girl planning 'to go to a nursing school and come back to the islands to work as a nurse'. She knows how she can get an education in mainland Japan that easily will give her a secure job in Oki later. In this way she can move away and come back without too much to worry about. It is a safe strategy limiting risk and uncertainty. Several students mention, as part of their life projects, that they want to 'contribute to the local community', but without really specifying how they intend to contribute. Place—in this case the Oki Islands—matters and young people's future plans are strongly influenced by their local community and its social relations (Wall and Olofsson 2008, p.444). The sense of community, reflected in a strong will to defend the local community and to contest haphazard social transformation, helps young people navigate transitions in the context of traditional expectations and (late) modern ambitions.

Analysis and conclusion

Young islanders aspiring to move to the mainland have to realise that special obstacles in some cases can prevent them from reaching their goals. Local social structures might suppress the individual's opportunities and choices (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). Young islanders, reputed to be shy and a bit reluctant to meet strangers, at least according to some of the high school teachers (mainly I-Turners) in Ama-Town, frequently encounter troubles when they—after final examination—prepare for university studies: matriculation could be too expensive; the results (grades from senior high school) could be inadequate; lack of motivation and interest could lead to abandonment of tertiary education; or pressure to help parents in work (farming, fishing, etc.) could prevent or delay the move to the mainland. Today, with the recreated Oki Dozen Senior High School in Ama-Town as powerhouse offering (glocal) community-oriented education, local young people are, largely, much better equipped for ventures in post-industrial Japan. They are proud of their islands that have managed—to a much greater degree than many other shrinking communities—to turn the tide by 're-energising the local economy' (Bernard 2016); and also that the islands, especially Nakanoshima, now captivates students and whole families from mainland cities. Oki has become a source of inspiration. Islands, says Lowenthal, 'inspire connections with the future' (2007, p.221). Young people's mobility structures and migration strategies are evidently not unattached to social and cultural constructions of their islands as place; their migration practices are, thence, chiefly to be understood 'as elements of their striving for self-realisation and construction of life projects' (Rye 2011, p.2). Mobility, from this point of view, is a competence, or (cultural) capital, needed to achieve goals in life. Today young people, focusing on their *self*, live in a 'fabric of relations […] more complex and mobile than ever before' (Lyotard 1984, p.15).

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Demotivated and unhappy about the deep-rooted lack of second chances in relation to transitions from secondary to tertiary education, from university to professional life, and also from adolescence to adulthood as regards acceptable lifestyles, young people, most of whom are residents of urban communities, seem to have lost faith in the parent generation. Disillusioned by the broken promises of a seniority-based society out of touch with recent developments, they start pursuing something new in something old, for instance what they associate to the grandparent generation bringing rural Japan to mind. According to a 2014 opinion poll (executed by the Prime Minister's Office) 47 percent of 18 and 19 year-old people hope to leave the cities and return to the countryside in Japan (Bernhard 2016). According to an international survey conducted by *Kairos Future* (Stellinger 2008) young people aged 19 to 30 in Japan are more pessimistic about their future than their peers from the seven other participating countries. Only five percent responded affirmatively to the statement 'My future looks bright' in Japan, while in Denmark, at the other extreme, 60 percent look positively at their future. Among the Japanese respondents, only nine percent support the announcement: 'I am confident I will have a good job in the future'. This represents an extremely low score compared to the others (China, USA and five European countries). The interesting question of being (or *not* being)

in charge of own life produces a similar pattern: just five percent of the Japanese respondents back the following hypothesis: 'People in my country have the opportunity to choose their own lives'. A higher number of Japanese people, but still the lowest in the survey, feel that they have control over their own future: 16 percent agree to the statement 'I have complete freedom and control over my own future'. Young people in Japan, the survey also unveils, are no very satisfied with their family—just 36 percent express satisfaction with family. This picture, per se, of contemporary Japan indicates a society without any crisis of 'excessive individualism' (Singly 2008, p.16). It echoes a society struggling to propel a trust in the order of things among its young (and young adult) citizens, a generation reacting to the absence of ontological security in relation to everyday life practices and their link to upcoming events. What young people need, and feel strongly bounded without, is recognition. They crave for emancipation from identities exclusively based on educational and professional achievements. They call for a fair share of power in contemporary Japanese society. What used to be the safe bet—the one shot—is now, in young people's perspective, more like social confinement. People moving from the city to the countryside, for instance the I-Turners in Ama-Town, many of them young adults in their twenties and thirties, search for something that the city cannot offer. Many islanders, as mentioned, are puzzled that people without any roots in Oki voluntarily chose to move (for shorter or longer periods of time) to the periphery, but I-Turners, contrarily, are surprised that so many islanders are so eager to move to the city. This paradox, or conflict of representation of rural/urban contrasts, is something that young people in Oki interpret and discuss, attempting to get beyond binary tendencies of urban abject and rural exalt, or vice versa, in their search for an answer to the future-oriented 'how shall I live' question. Young people are not only looking at differences and similarities between the Oki Islands and the large cities (with Tokyo and Osaka as the prime icons of urbanism), because they are also opposing their island community to other rural areas (inland-islands) in, practically, irreversible decline. Young people do not want a neighbourless community with empty houses and overgrown hamlets in Oki (Matanle et al. 2011; Matanle and Sato 2010), nor a non-metropolitan 'sprawl of shopping centres, semi-prefabricated homes and tacky business fronts' (Mock 2014, p.12) Small islands bring out 'generous communitarian impulses', says Gillis (2007, p.286), generating feelings of unity and freedom, but also of isolation. Oki youth ready to set sail for the mainland has carefully reflected on the many risks and uncertainties that the great, but uncontroversial decision involves. It is, basically, a question of leaving what is well known and familiar behind in the pursuit of something considered important for your life and future. The alternative, to stay at home and sacrifice educational or other professional ambitions, is also a crucial decision. It is, as a matter of fact, also risky, but without the same challenges relating to geographical transition. Many students in Ama-Town, we have seen, want to contribute to their islands' sustainable development, but they need a period in mainland Japan—for further education and new exiting life experiences—before eventually (hopefully) heading back to the archipelago in the Sea of Japan. Oki is the anchor of their identities, helping them to find a fixed position in troubled waters, to be able to brake when the current is too strong, but also, when time is ripe, to pull up the anchor and set sail for a new harbour. The good thing is that you can always turn and go back to the islands, if things go wrong… 'When I live in Tokyo and had problems', says an old Oki bullfighter, 'the thought of those bulls fighting with all their might consoled me and I felt I could go on' (Klien 2012, p102). Social marginalisation, in mainland cities, is contrasted to social participation and well-being in Oki. In Oki, the islanders feel a belonging that is difficult to substitute by a life immersed in companies in cities. Now not only elderly people ask what makes life worth living—*ikigai*—because young people are, more than ever before, also preoccupied about their future: will I also have god memories of a healthy and meaningful life to transmit to my children? In order 'to have a sense of who we are', says Charles Taylor (1989 cited by Giddens 1991, p. 54), 'we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going'. Oki youth do not—now they know—have any reason to feel as second-grade citizens because of their life on the periphery. Oki islanders express less future-pessimism than many young people elsewhere in the country. Their community inspires, we have seen, general attempts to rekindle confidence in the future. In their dreams Oki will never change; in their aspirations Oki will grow and develop into a dynamic and sustainable community; and while in reality nobody knows what will happen to the islands in the Sea of Japan, local young people's perspectives and assessments about the future are contributing to a better understanding of social processes in urban and rural post-industrial Japan.

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