

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ Tokyo)  
DIJ History and Humanities Study Group



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**Silk-Making Knowledge in Amami Ōshima as Critical Archipelagic Heritage**

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The signature designs featured on Amami Ōshima *tsumugi* textiles today are so intricate that they can resemble shimmering pixels on a computer screen. A laborious "double weaving" process (developed in 1907) coupled to a program of dyework allows a pre-planned pattern to materialize at every intersecting warp and weft of raw silk thread as a weaver sends her shuttle back and forth across her loom. The plant life and iron-rich rice paddy mud of the humid subtropical islands of Amami Ōshima also play a part in the resulting textile, as dyemasters use them to create the deep brown-black pigment that is distinctive of the region. Even though designers have been confined to the geometry of squares, the patterns appearing on these textiles have changed remarkably over time, well after the material of the textiles changed from short-fiber pongee yarns to raw silk. Why? This talk reflects upon recent fieldwork conducted in Amami Ōshima driven by this simple question. Study of the dynamic process of textile production illuminates the complicated archipelagic location between Kagoshima and Okinawa that has informed Ōshima *tsumugi* production and trade. Assumptions about the heritage of this *tsumugi* weaving knowledge was especially tested during the 1970s when Amami Ōshima weavers and their supporters were compelled to protest the outflow of their technology, materials, and know-how to South Korea. Tracing how weavers themselves scrutinized the notion of Amami Ōshima *tsumugi* enables critical contextualization of the postwar consumption of Amami Ōshima *tsumugi* by the "mainland" relative to the preservation of archipelagic knowledge and livelihood. Furthermore, this precariousness overlapped with environmental precarity that faced Amami Ōshima at the time. The late twentieth-century movement that redefined Amami Ōshima *tsumugi* as life-giving and requiring of protection provides an important contrast for understanding the 2021 UNESCO designation of Amami Ōshima as a "natural" World Heritage Site and how the textile persists to this day.

*Dr. Lisa Onaga is a Senior Research Scholar at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, Germany, where she leads the "Proteins and Fibers" Working Group. Her work focuses on the ownership and authorship of knowledge at the material interface of animal (especially silkworm) and human life in agricultural, laboratory, health, and industrial settings. In August, she is affiliated with the DIJ as a Scholar in Residence.*

**About:**

The DIJ History and Humanities Study Group is a forum open to scholars working on Japan in any field of the humanities. This session is organized by Harald Kümmerle. All are welcome to attend.

**Registration:**

Registration for this online event is required via email to [kueimmerle@dijtokyo.org](mailto:kueimmerle@dijtokyo.org) until August 17 (JST). Log in data will be provided after registration.