

“THE BEACH IS CLOSED, BUT NOT TO US”:  
 PANDEMIC EXPERIENCE AND SOCIAL  
 BOUNDARIES IN RURAL OKINAWA

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an anthropological and ethnographic perspective on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected and shaped rural community social behaviour in Kayo village during Japan’s first official state of emergency, April 7th to May 6th, 2020. It draws from observations and informal conversations with villagers during this period. First, it discusses the researcher’s experience of living in a rural village in northern Okinawa during the state of emergency and addresses the position of the ethnographer during the pandemic. It explores the Japanese concept of *uchi/soto* (inside/outside), to discuss the insider/outsider dynamics that characterise everyday social life in Okinawa. Secondly, it engages with Marshall Sahlins’ (2013) idea of kinship as ‘social mutuality’ to consider how the pandemic invites us to rethink interpersonal relationships, space negotiation, and social boundaries, and how the latter are reconstructed and negotiated according to the new situation (emergency state). The example of Okinawa rural communities shows how rural populations can reconceptualise their environment and practices during the pandemic. It allows us to understand how notions of space, accessibility and kinship are reshaped into subtle boundaries between locals and outsiders in order to regulate access.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19 pandemic • ethnography • social behaviour • kinship • Okinawa

The research for this article\* was conducted between February and May 2020 in Kayo, a small rural village in Okinawa, Japan’s southernmost prefecture. On April 7, 2020,

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Japan announced a state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the state of emergency, Kayo's local beach was closed to the public. Although Kayo beach is public, villagers added barriers to the beach's main entrance. However, the rule did not apply to those living in the village, surfers, fishermen, and other locals who came to the beach for walks, including myself.

In this article, I will offer an anthropological and ethnographic perspective on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected and shaped community social behaviour in the village of Kayo during Japan's first official state of emergency (April 7–May 6, 2020). The question of why Kayo beach was closed to some and not others guides my discussion. First, I will draw on the Japanese concept of *uchi* ('inside')/*soto* ('outside') (see also Bachnik 1992). I will use this concept to discuss the insider/outsider dynamics that characterise everyday social life in Japan. In the context of Kayo, for instance, these dynamics determine who can access public space (and is, therefore, considered an *uchi*), and who cannot (therefore considered *soto*, outsider or foreigner to the community). Second, I will explore kinship ideas drawing on Marshall Sahlins' (2013) definition of kinship as 'social mutuality'. Sahlins suggests that kinship extends beyond biological factors to include broader networks. Social mutuality is present in some aspects of kinship experienced by Kayo villagers. Sahlins' ideas can aid in the discussion of how the pandemic invites us to rethink interpersonal relationships, space negotiation, and social boundaries. However, I suggest that kinship can sometimes go beyond emotional connections and communal bounding. I will draw on additional studies on kinship and Chinese studies (Song 2014) to propose that kinship can be adapted to a particular situation and time.

This article uses a reflective approach to examine how a group of people in a rural village go about living their lives in relation to one another. I look at the sorts of social behaviour and social practice that occur in times of crisis, and the interactions insiders have with others in this new situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the emergency state. This study opens a discussion about space and accessibility, which are reshaped into subtle boundaries between locals and others to regulate access.

Drawing from this analysis, I suggest that Kayo is an example of how rural communities reinforce their own ideas of social mutuality, solidarity, and interrelation; and, at the same time, recreate boundaries in an *uchi/soto* dynamic between themselves and those who they consider to be outsiders. I begin by reflecting on my position as an ethnographer, non-Japanese, and a guest, conducting fieldwork during a state of emergency.

#### FIELDWORK DURING THE PANDEMIC: METHODS AND THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

While most of the world was in lockdown, I was able to do what few researchers could do at that time: walk freely. Japan declared a national state of emergency later than any of its neighbouring countries, relying on voluntary restraint (Nishi 2020: 331). Japan cannot legally enforce European-style lockdowns. Most of the emergency measures were implemented as requests and instructions to Japanese citizens.

Current literature shows us that fieldwork during the pandemic needed to balance the virtues and "the dangers of our presence in the field" (Fine and Abramson 2020: 1).

Gary Alan Fine and Corey M. Abramson (2020) report on the challenges of conducting ethnographic studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. They suggest that research methods differ in this context, and that the sociocultural, religious, and/or political context wherein these studies occur is important. The COVID-19 pandemic is experienced much differently in a rural village in Okinawa than in other parts of the world, and in general, Japan has dealt with COVID-19 in a different way than the West.

An in-depth discussion about COVID-19 in Japan is beyond the scope of this article, but a few case studies are worth mentioning. In anthropology studies, Claudia Merli (2020) examines the resurgence of the Japanese historical figure of *yōkai*,<sup>1</sup> which can be translated as ‘strange apparition’) and shows that the *yōkai* interconnects with political discourse within the context of COVID-19. Andy Crump and Tetsuya Tanimoto (2020) report on Japan’s ecosystem-based lifestyle and its effect on coping with COVID-19. In addition, Maxime Polleri (2020) compares contamination patterns in Fukushima to COVID-19 contamination patterns. These case studies provide just a few examples of the impact of COVID-19 within Japan’s social and cultural spheres and how populations interpret and experience the pandemic.

Although the ways we experience this pandemic differ across various societies, the issues remain the same: safety, protection, social distancing, caring, and coping with the crisis. Because fieldwork is intrinsically personal, ‘who’ and ‘where’ the ethnographer is can and will affect what is observed and what is written (Jarzabkowski et al. 2014). Whereas COVID-19 is global, the way countries, societies, and communities deal with the crisis is always local. Therefore, I saw this research as an opportunity to learn more about the sociocultural context of my environment. I was eager to learn how locals in a rural village experienced a state of emergency. What would change in this village? What sort of social behaviour would emerge amidst a small community of people? I asked Taiga,<sup>2</sup> the owner of the guest house where I was staying, and his family permission to remain in Kayo during the state of emergency. Kayo was a village I knew little about, and I stayed there, amidst people about whom I knew little.

Fieldwork methods for this study consisted of observing and taking pictures and notes during informal conversations with the host family and their friends, followed by reflection. I also had informal conversations with other Kayo villagers, as well as outsiders, which I will explain later. I saw this situation as an opportunity to “explore and be creative when it comes to pursuing research projects amid the current pandemic” (Sy et al. 2020: 4), while carefully re-evaluating the situation and making decisions regarding when and how to approach people.

In times of crisis, where bodies need to physically distance themselves from other bodies, researchers in the field should “recognize that our presence can spread disease, just as we might become infected by those very informants” (Fine and Abramson 2020: 1). Kayo is inhabited by many elderly people; thus, I was careful to always maintain social distancing. I monitored daily media updates on COVID-19 and asked Taiga when and with whom I could interact given their age. Thus, this fieldwork has limitations since I mainly interacted with Taiga and his family, or the people to whom Taiga introduced me. Nevertheless, I took the initiative to talk to other beach trekkers, mainly, women who lived nearby and came to the beach to walk and to collect garbage. On the beach, I would often see a couple of surfers, friends of Taiga, who seemed approachable despite the circumstances.

Other challenges were that most elderly people in Kayo speak using a mixture of Japanese and an Okinawan dialect that I could not understand. Japanese mainlanders living in Okinawa also have problems understanding Okinawan dialect, although at a subtler level since they are Japanese natives and can understand the context. When speaking to and listening to the elderly people, I relied on Japanese or English translation. Nevertheless, the major challenge was trying to connect with people in a village I knew little about, at a time that demanded the opposite.

#### A BRIEF ON OKINAWA

Okinawa is part of the Ryūkyū Islands and is the southernmost prefecture of Japan. The islands were an independent kingdom until annexed by Japan in 1879. Okinawa was a Japanese colony throughout the early 20th century. The island was under US administration for 27 years during the Battle of Okinawa in 1944–1945, and following Japan's surrender, until being returned to Japan in 1972. Currently, Okinawa has a population of about 1.5 million and is the poorest prefecture (MIAC 2016).

Studies on Okinawa include cultural identity (Tomiyama 2005), the military presence on the island (Siddle 1997; Hooke and Siddle 2003; Tanji 2012), and Okinawa religion (Allen 2002). Ichiro Tomiyama (2005) focuses on identity issues and emphasises that the disparity between the high value that the Japanese attribute to their modernity and the lesser value attributed to this by Okinawans, has hindered efforts to build a mass modern capitalist economy. The annexation policies perpetuate mainlander stereotypes of Okinawans as backward, lazy, prone to insanity, irrational, and unhygienic. These characterisations of Okinawans suggest that mainlanders are hardworking, efficient, sane, rational, and clean (*ibid.*).

Okinawa's history has also been shaped by the US military. US bases were built on Okinawan during the occupation. After the military selected sites for its new bases, people were not allowed to return to their land (Takazato 2000: 42). Japan regained command of Okinawa in 1972, however the islanders faced other challenges such as enduring political tensions with the US military and a decline in jobs, which forced many to migrate overseas in search of better conditions (*ibid.*).

One of the most important events that helped to ignite protests was the rape of a 12-year-old Okinawa girl by three US military men in 1995 (Angst 2001). This event led to one of the biggest anti-base demonstrations in Okinawa since the handover. It was transformed into what Linda Isako Angst (2001: 255) calls a symbol of national subjugation, "acting as a catalyst to mobilize Okinawans (including tens of thousands of women for the first time)", and "galvanizing long-standing frustrations about US bases and the abuses inflicted by US personnel against local people". Masamichi Inoue (2004: 84) suggests that ongoing tensions between Okinawans and the US military are shaped by Okinawa's cultural and political-economic landscape, "in which new social issues of culture and identity enter, erode, and transform a sedimented history of resistance of the Okinawan people". Interestingly, Inoue rejects the concept of a native identity that resists the power of Japan and the US or takes the initiative to protect the island's peace and prosperity. Instead, he suggests that to address the multifaceted interface of Okinawan politics, one should look carefully at notions of "cultural identity and small

social movements" (ibid.: 86), discourses of kinship, interpersonal and social relationships, as well as socio-economic class.

Most recently, Megumi Chibana (2020) explored the correlation between land-based practices of farming and political activities in Okinawan communities. She uses the term 'resurgent' to refer to locals committed to the revival of their space and maintains that "farming on military space constitutes the exercise of indigenous rights and responsibilities to self-determination by making Okinawans' presence and practices visible and sustainable" (ibid.: 2).

These studies are just a few examples that show how Okinawa's complex history and experience with Japan and the US military are fodder for ongoing debate about political control deprivation, economic dependency, threats posed to the local environment, and a desire to live in a society free of harmful and discriminatory behaviour towards Okinawa citizens. The example of Kayo village also shows us how some villagers feel part of a resurgence of Okinawa identity in order to negotiate social boundaries using the state of emergency as a legitimate reason to close their beach and coffee shop to outsiders, while internally negotiating its accessibility to their kin.

#### KAYO VILLAGE

Kayo village in northern Okinawa is off the national main road. It has a beach that is well-known amongst locals as a good spot for fishing, surfing, and beach trekking. The village is often visited by US military, expat families, and other tourists such as Japanese mainlanders and foreigners. It has a community centre where locals teach exercise, sewing and cooking classes and lead other activities for children. This venue was closed during the emergency period, although during my first week in Kayo it was still open, and I saw some women sewing cloth masks for the community. Kayo village also has a small shrine (*utaki*) at the top of a small mountain that overlooks the village, and which is sometimes visited by tourists. The Chura Island Nature School is also based in the village and operates as a research centre, offering education programs about nature and the Okinawa environment.<sup>3</sup> During my field research, the school also remained closed.

About 30 to 40 people live in Kayo. The majority are elderly people born and raised in the village. When I arrived, I was introduced to Taiga, his wife, and their three children. In his early 40s, Taiga is a professional masseur and amateur surfer. Originally from southern Okinawa, he was living in New Zealand when he met his wife, Nada, a Japanese mainlander from Tokyo who previously worked as a nurse. Upon leaving New Zealand, they decide to return to Okinawa and relocate to the north. Taiga is a young man with a strong commitment to his community and caring for the elderly. His guest house and coffee shop attract tourists, which benefits the village. Because most villagers are elderly, it may be beneficial for the community to have a young person serving in a caretaking capacity.

Apart from Taiga's wife, there are a few Japanese mainlanders living in Kayo village. They include two young families with children and dogs. One couple mentioned that only the husband worked. He was a photographer and I sometimes saw him taking pictures around the village. On one occasion, during my last week in the village, he took several pictures of an agrarian ritual that was conducted by the old *noro* (priestess). All

the families that move to Kayo, including Taiga's family, do so for the same reason: the desire to raise their children in a quieter and rural area, away from urban life.

Taiga introduced me to who he considered to be 'key people' in the village and explained to them that I was going to stay in the village during the emergency period. I was introduced to the young couples, to the woman who ran the only (and very small) convenience store, and some of the women who normally ran the activities at the community centre. I also met an old man who sold his pottery at the local market in Nago city. Later, I was introduced to the local *noro* who was 92 years old at the time and responsible for conducting Okinawan religious rituals for the community.

Taiga and Nada run the only coffee shop in the village and have a guesthouse that is rented to both Japanese and foreign tourists. Because of the state of emergency in April 2020, the coffee shop was closed, tourist reservations were cancelled, and I was able to stay at their guesthouse. The nearest supermarket is in Nago city, approximately 25 kilometres by car. One bus runs through the village twice a day: at 6:52 AM and 7:32 PM. As I had no car, I relied on Nada or others who would offer me rides to Nago when I needed to buy groceries.

#### NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES

Following the state of emergency and in accordance with government law, the local beach, just like other tourist attractions, was closed to the public. On the beach and other places around the island, Taiga and other villagers placed signposts asking people to stay at home (Photo 1). Although Kayo beach is public and there are other small entrance gates along the main road, they added barriers to the beach's main entrance. However, the rule did not apply to those living in the village, surfers, fishermen, and other locals who came to the beach for walks, including myself. When I asked if I was allowed to enter the beach, Taiga replied, "we closed it down because we don't want others to come, but the beach is not closed to us, we can go to the beach whenever we want" (FM 2020: Taiga).

By 'others', Taiga meant those who were strangers to the village, which I translate as general tourists, American military families and single soldiers who would often come to the beach for entertainment. Kayo village is off the national main road and relatively close to Nago city and the Henoko district (US military base). Thus, it is relatively easy to access. Taiga then went on to say, with a smile, "the beach will be much quieter". He explained that the outsiders who came to the beach often made too much noise. On occasion, people left behind beer cans and other garbage. Taiga said it was "annoying" for the villagers to have to collect others' waste. Although only a few people came to the beach during the emergency period, I still saw and helped people (mainly women) collect garbage on the beach in the morning.

Every community has a standard of socially appropriate behaviour or etiquette that must be followed (Kang 2021: 1). Yet, knowing how to act in a specific place can be challenging for someone who is not familiar with the customs (Frake 1974; cited also in Kang 2021: 2). In this sense, cultural knowledge is needed to act accordingly in unknown places. In ethnographic research, our position is challenged by the participants' percep-





Photo 1. Sign saying that the beach is closed to tourists. Photo by the author, May 8, 2020.

tion of the researcher's position and the need to gain the community's trust (Boulay 2017: 214). Thus, I questioned whether the position I gained, which granted me access to the beach as a local, was representative of a trust-gaining process and insider position. Being allowed to stay at the village and access the beach cannot be regarded as the ultimate proof that I had gained the community's trust. However, the fact that I was allowed to stay, shows that people work toward mutual benefits in times of crisis (Elcheroth and Drury 2020). Nevertheless, I was still an 'outside' member getting help from 'inside' members during a time of crisis. This social interaction led me to think about the sort of *in* and *out* aspects present in Japanese identity and social life.

Japanese social life has often been described in dualistic terms, for example, *uchi/soto* (inside/outside), *omote/ura* (in front/behind), *giri/ninjoo* (social obligation/personal feelings or emotions) or *tatemaeh/hone* (surface level communication/one's true feelings) (Doi 1986; also cited in Bachnik 1992: 5). Regarding the *uchi/soto* concept, in Japanese studies Jane M. Bachnik (*ibid.*) explains, "*uchi/soto* has two sets of meanings: the directional coordinates inside/outside, plus specifications for self and society". Unlike the English binary of inside/outside, *uchi/soto* carries other distinct connotations that add to its complexity and ambiguity (Kang 2021). The inside and outside aspects of Japanese social life are neither exclusive nor absolute. Instead, we can see them as degrees of inclusion/exclusion that depend on the context or situation (Bachnick 1992).

The inside–outside paradigm has been examined in studies of Japanese honorific language (Lebra 1976; Wetzel 2019) and language pedagogy (Goekler 2010), gender relations (Rosenberger 2019), as well as in discussions regarding foreign–local and traditional–modern relationships (Ashby 2013) and teamwork relationships amidst Japanese nursing students (Honda et al. 2016). Jamie Louise Goekler (2010: 3) discusses *uchi/soto* in her Master’s thesis, explaining that the inside–outside dynamic in Japanese society is affected by factors such as close relationships, social networks, marriage, age, as well as physical space. Some examples include the places where guests should sit when invited to others’ homes, the places where workers should sit, and the kinds of speech that people choose to use in society (ibid.: 13).

Thus, *uchi/soto* can be regarded as a cultural gauge that indicates the appropriate behaviour in any social situation or regarding any person. In this way, it organises personal identity, family members and friends, gender, age, socio-economic class, and environments at school or work. *Soto*, for instance, can refer to anything outside, such as dirt or impurity, and can have formal or secular connotations, as well as public or stranger associations. *Uchi* may refer to one’s home, personal feelings, family members, or informal relationships. The intersectional nature of these concepts creates dynamics that influence how Japanese people address one another and what topics they choose to talk about (Kang 2021). In the case of Kayo, these dynamics influence how the villagers negotiate who is allowed to visit the beach or other places. I will unpack this idea using Youngjin Kang’s study of the *genkan* – a place in Japanese houses to remove shoes upon entering – as an example.

Kang interprets the *genkan* as a transitional interaction space where *uchi/soto* identities are negotiated in everyday Japanese life. He analyses a series of Japanese movie scenes that present the *genkan* as a scenario and suggests that the place is neither *uchi* nor *soto* but a transitional and ambiguous space for *uchi/soto* actions. Kang explains that Japanese people attribute different meanings to guests who are outsiders. These meanings define who can enter their house and who must remain outside. Thus, *genkan* is a space where a “visitor *uchi/soto* identity can often be negotiated, especially in cases where that identity may be temporarily ambiguous or in question” (ibid.: 336). He finds that, whereas in some cases the person’s identity is a direct *uchi* relationship, for example, someone who lives in the house, at other times *uchi/soto* identity may change during an interaction depending on how the situation evolves. The author developed a framework of levels of *uchi/soto* interactions to explain the complexity of these interactions between guest and host. These levels are high or low insider, and low to high, or high to low.

From Kang’s perspective, one could argue that as a guest, I too was negotiating *uchi/soto* identities. On the one hand, my position was undoubtedly that of a *soto*, an outsider and a client/guest, who provided Taiga and his family with a source of income during these difficult times. Although he knew that I was planning on moving to Okinawa, when conversing with other villagers Taiga kept referring to me as a “researcher from Kyoto” a clear identification of someone who is *soto*, foreign, and not from Okinawa. My position was therefore that of an outsider, a temporary resident of the village. On the other hand, those same villagers to whom I was introduced, knew that I was in Okinawa to study their culture. Unlike tourists who visit the beach for entertainment, my research and interest promoted me to an *uchi* identity.



My *uchi* capacity/identity allowed me to observe and form part of people's daily lives in Kayo, which seemed to continue as normal despite the emergency. I helped collect waste from the beach alongside villagers and had chats with the locals who seemed open to conversation. I also helped villagers collect bugs for a small agrarian ritual festival commonly known as the insect festival (*Mushi okuri* or *Abushibare*), which was held during my last week in the village. During this ritual, some people from neighbouring villages came to Kayo to attend the ceremony. People sat down next to each other chatting about the old days when the ritual was performed with animals at the beach (Photo 2). I was able to listen to an old *noro* talk about how she performed the ritual in the old days and how people from outside the village came to visit her and attend this special event. People's inside/outside identity changed according to the situation, time, and context. For example, whereas the beach was closed to tourists, it was open to locals, and whereas village tourist attractions remained closed, people from neighbouring villages were welcome at the insect ritual ceremony. The *uchi/soto* identities at play represent the way "the social order shapes what is proper behaviour, while the relationship between group members determines the social order" (Ashby 2013: 258).

Although Okinawan people are known for their welcoming nature (Tomiyama 2005), I understood that my *uchi* identity was temporary. The 'hospitality' would have happened differently (or not at all) under normal life circumstances. Jacques Derrida (2000) problematises the notion of hospitality, a concept that is never absolute and is always accompanied by clashing connotations of what it means to be 'welcome'. His theorising of this concept is useful for understanding Kayo community social behaviour and the *uchi/soto* idea. In other words, hospitality, accessibility, and social group integration might be limited, depending on the context and occasion.

Inoue (2004) discusses the annual Okinawa dragon boat race called *Hari*. The dragon boats hold 42 team members: 32 paddlers, two gongmen, two steersmen and six others including a banner holder. This event is a traditional practice dating back to the days of the Ryukyu kingdom (what is today Okinawa). Several districts in Okinawa take part in the race, including the Henoko district where Kayo is situated. Since the 1970s, US Marines have participated in the races as 'guest teams', meaning they are allowed to participate but do not take part in the official traditional aspect of the race. Inoue notes that some Marines find the limitations placed on their participation in the official race somewhat disappointing. Nevertheless, he also explains that for Okinawans, allowing Marines to participate in the event promotes 'friendship relationships' with the locals. On one occasion, Inoue observed that although everyone seemed to be pleased and enjoying the event, "Marines and the Henoko residents did not mingle" (ibid.: 90). Instead, locals saw this event as "a matter of performative containment of the Other at a border of inclusion and exclusion" (ibid.). Henoko residents, "refashioned Okinawan tradition to entertain the Other as a friend, while carefully distancing this friend" (ibid.). This example shows that Okinawa 'hospitality' towards the US military, and welcoming the other, are constantly being negotiated. In other words, welcome is never absolute (Derrida 2000).

Whereas Inoue's (2004) study questions whether both hosts and 'guests' simply coexist within invisible social lines, Michael Foster's (2013) study of Oga residents and their 'uninvited guests' draws on different layers of insider and outsider perspectives to provide an analysis of how the Japanese relate to the 'other' in traditional perfor-

mance. Foster (2013) studied a Japanese festival called Namahage, during which figures dressed as demons enter private homes to chase and scare children. He talks about the heritage tourists who travelled to Oga for the festival.

In his analysis of interactions between residents and tourists, Foster applies Japanese ethnologist Origuchi Shinobu's (1872–1953) concept of *marebito*, or the 'rare person' or 'uninvited guest', and corresponding explanation of the process by which the private becomes public. Foster (2013: 208) explains that according to Origuchi, the 'rare person' possesses magical powers and is "permitted temporary admission into the community". For Foster, the contemporary Namahage festival evolved from a "drama only for insiders" into a successful "commercial attraction" (ibid.). Depending on the context, the festival performance can be internal (in the privacy of a home) or external (at local hotels) and can provide economic benefits to the performers and other villagers, or anyone providing services to tourists, i.e., hotels, vendors, etc. Foster describes the interaction between old and new traditions in terms of an inward/outward dynamic, oriented either towards the community (insiders) or tourists (outsiders). He claims that "Namahage is no longer the property of a single folk group; rather, it provides dynamic means of communication, of commerce, between different groups" (ibid.: 312). In this respect, the presence of these 'uninvited guests' is not entirely negative. In Oga, the uninvited guest is transformed into "the treasured visitor from another world" (ibid.: 316), who brings material profit to the village and its residents. As a result, the Namahage festival has drawn attention to the importance of heritage tourism in Japan. Oga residents open the village to outsiders, so that they might participate in and experience Oga's traditional culture.

I have drawn on these examples to show that whether Okinawan's 'share' the *Hari* dragon-boat race with US militaries, or Oga residents open their tradition to heritage tourists, *uchi/soto* shapes the identities of both locals and outsiders and social behaviour at these parties. In this way, insider/outsider social identity constructions and the negotiation of these identities are part of Japanese daily social life and cultural meaning-making.

Both the Oga and *Hari* cases shed light on question of how people are accepted as insiders and when must they remain outsiders. They also reveal the extent to which it is possible for outsiders to attend or participate in rituals, for example, sailing races or, in Kayo's case, access the village public beach and other touristic resources. In addition, these case focus attention on another important aspect that is relevant to the Kayo context: economic factors. Studies have shown that US military bases in Okinawa created significant economic dependency on US military families for the islanders (Takazato 2000). Many landowners in Okinawa rent out their property to the US military due to high rents, and just like Oga residents, Okinawans rely heavily on tourism, both from the mainland and overseas. Therefore, when Taiga and his family decided to rent me the guest house, I felt like Oga's 'uninvited guest' who was integrated into the Namahage festival because of the economic benefits these guests bring to the community. Nevertheless, the interpersonal aspect, such as showing interest in Okinawa culture, daily chats, or helping to clean the beach were, in my view, just as important to my position there.

Based on the examples mentioned above, it could be argued that the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the state of emergency allowed me to have an *uchi* identity

that I might not have gained under normal circumstances. These sorts of inside/outside interactions make me question what knowledge one must gain to be fully integrated into a community, and if this is possible at all. It also makes me question what norms and social practices count as *uchi/soto* in Japanese social life, and particularly in the case of Kayo.

Based on my observations of peoples' behaviour, not just towards myself but towards others as well, *uchi/soto* associations that indicate who is important and valued as part of the group are subject to change and are always negotiated between community members and outsiders. Interpersonal relationships and social interactions are not only based on the *uchi/soto* concept in Japanese social thought, but also on the idea that kinship is culturally shaped. The following case illustrates this idea.

#### "WE ALL SURF TOGETHER"

During my time at Kayo, I observed that people who are not from the village but maintain solid interpersonal connections with some of the villagers, can become kin. In this regard, Sahlins' (2013: 2) definition of kinship as "mutuality of being", which he refers to as "people who are intrinsic to one another's existence" is applicable. When Sahlins (2011a: 6) argues that "kinship is [...] the perduring condition of the possibility of its (unstable) practice", he infers that an enduring system is a crucial facet of kinship. In this sense, kinship is rooted in culture. For Sahlins (2011a; 2011b; 2013), unlike biological relations, mutuality of being arises from an awareness of a connectedness between people that exists regardless of whether they are biologically related. The idea of mutuality of being is viewed as any sort of emotional attachment between people and their lives, set within the realm of human consciousness and which is "intrinsic to each other's identity and existence" (Sahlins 2013: 62).

On one occasion I met a local named Kazuki who regularly came to Kayo beach to surf. When I asked him about the closing of the beach and access to the village he answered: "I come here almost every day, well... it depends on the conditions. I live half an hour from Kayo, but I know Taiga and his family, I know the village, we all surf together" (FM 2020: Kazuki). Kazuki's answer suggests that although he lives outside the village, he has earned an *uchi* identity because he knows the villagers and they "all surf together". In other words, the interpersonal relationship is sufficient to grant Kazuki access to the beach and the village. I would often see Kazuki in the village, casually chatting to the supermarket lady or other locals, and sometimes helping Taiga with small jobs that needed to be done around the village.

On another occasion, Kazuki arrived at Kayo with a couple, a New Zealander man and a Japanese woman who had a young child. Kazuki introduced me to the couple and told me that they were also friends of Taiga and his family, having met years ago in Australia. We had a brief conversation about COVID-19 and my reason for being in Kayo. Taiga's wife Nada opened the coffee shop and they all sat outside the shop, chatting about their decision to move to Nago, how they were trying to find a school for their child, and their concerns about COVID-19. When they left, I asked Nada if she was ready to reopen the coffee shop. She answered, "No, that was just for friends. I need to wait until the state of emergency is over and my kids can go back to school." (FM 2020:

Nada). The couple kept coming back to the coffee shop at weekends. I also witnessed some tourists coming by, but Nada would politely tell them that the shop was closed. Yet, she would open it and sit outside to have coffee with her friends. On some occasions, other villagers also sat down, although briefly, to enjoy coffee and light conversation. Thus, when the coffee shop opened, even if only briefly, people could reconnect with each other.

Although the fear of the pandemic was evident in their conversation, opening the coffee shop (when shops needed to be closed) and sitting as a group (when social distancing was required) disregarded the measures people should have adhered to during this period. Nonetheless, for Nada, opening the coffee shop for friends and chit-chatting with villagers was not necessarily seen as a transgression. In times of crisis, these interactions can be regarded as an act of social cohesion that promotes community values and a sense of belonging (Whitehouse and Lanman 2014). The value of interpersonal relationships played an important role in determining how and when Nada decided to open the coffee shop and spend time with her friends.

In Kayo village, people may exhibit different attitudes towards those who are considered outsiders and those who are considered insiders, regardless of whether they live in the village or nearby. The kin group is extended to neighbours, extended family members and friends. Sahlins (2011a: 6; cited also in Song 2014: 9) explains that the enduring system of kinship is not objective in nature, rather “the corollary subjectivity of mutual being” is “diffuse enduring solidarity”. For Sahlins, a friend’s visit to a coffee shop and sharing concerns about COVID-19 are not just physical interactions. Rather, it is through such interactions that people form “intrinsic attachment” and a sense of “intersubjective belonging” (Sahlins 2011a: 12). They are also signs of an existing social bond and social cohesion.

Sahlins’ notion of kinship as a broader network of relations that extends beyond familial ties is evident in some interactions between Kayo villagers. For instance, I observed that whether people are born in the village or not, or whether they are Okinawan or mainlanders are not the main criteria for determining who is a close relative. To the villagers, what seemed to matter most was the day-to-day interactions. It was not unusual for Taiga to help massage old ladies, or for people in the village to participate in agrarian ceremonies, or for friends to come and surf at the beach or have coffee. Nonetheless, I note that although emotional connections can help shape interpersonal relationships and communal bonding, Sahlins appears to assume that kinship is a single phenomenon, whereas the present study draws attention to kinship’s defining characteristics, which are opposite in nature: enduring solidarity and temporary fluidity. I propose that in Kayo, during the state of emergency, kinship was shaped not only by emotional and communal bonds but also by the situation, and can even be temporary in nature.

Let us consider the example of the ethnographic study conducted by Zhifang Song (2014) among Jinan villagers in north China. Song criticises Sahlins’ kinship idea, and other anthropological approaches, to the extent that they view kinship as a single ‘thing’, as a social system or social process, or as a combination of the two. Interestingly, Song (ibid.: 6) proposes that kinship “is a complex matrix of social phenomena involving multiple dimensions of subjectivity and objectivity”. He proposes that Jinan villagers

have several levels of association. These levels do not necessarily adhere to a more classical understanding of kinship, nor do they adhere entirely to Sahlins' theory of social mutuality. He suggests that there may be some instances of "intrinsic attachment" in his analysis of kinship formation between villagers of Jinan, exemplified by the case of a daughter-in-law who is praised by the community and is seen to be loving towards her in-laws. Nevertheless, Song (ibid.: 16) argues that in some cases the bonds that bind Jinan villagers are beyond intersubjectivity and emotional attachment, "since the emotional attachment might be changed and even completely terminated as a result of interpersonal interactions". The author maintains that kinship can be multi-subjective, and "also materialize into various behavioural, institutional and material forms, which are substantive evidence for the existence of the kinship relationship" (ibid.: 20). Let us return to the case of Kayo villagers.

Based on the above, an answer can be formulated to the question regarding who is allowed to enter the beach or who can sit inside the village's premises having coffee. Most of the people living in Kayo are connected by family ties and their friends regularly come and go. In this sense, from Sahlins' perspective, those who are connected to the village can become kin based on a mutuality of social being that comes from allowing each other into their private spaces and spending time together during times of crisis. The social behaviours I witnessed among some Kayo villagers support Sahlins' idea of social mutuality of being and the 'intersubjective' nature of kinship relations. However, as Song suggests, kinship does not only arise due to an emotional bond between individuals. The case of Kayo villagers demonstrates how kinship can arise due to a situation or within a specific context, such as the state of emergency, and how the concept is retooled to accommodate 'other' people like myself and others who had recently moved to the village and were also attempting to cope with the pandemic. According to this perspective, agents do not need to share an emotional bond to be kin (Song 2014: 9). No one from Kayo village has known me long enough to develop an emotional bond with me. However, knowledge of the fact that I had arrived just before the national emergency was declared, made it possible for me to become, although temporarily, part of the village's community network and extended family. To my view, helping me with groceries or allowing me to access the beach and collect garbage while talking to the neighbours are ways in which the villagers' expressed their acceptance of me as kin.

On the one hand, Sahlins' position fits my observations that kinship can be subjective and intersubjective. On the other hand, Kayo villagers' attitudes regarding who is *soto* and who is *uchi* can also influence how they relate to their kin. This distinction is not just based on an emotional attachment but can vary according to a particular situation and time. In other words, there is mutual recognition (i.e., the mutuality of being at a particular time and as a result of a particular situation (i.e., the pandemic). The state of emergency and its restrictions led me to enter the village but resulted in others being left 'outside' of its beach and coffeeshop. Therefore, I see these actions as the result of an interaction between parties in certain types of social events/situation that can redefine kinship relationships at certain moments.

The phrase *ichariba chode*, which can be loosely translated as 'once we meet, we become brothers and sisters', is used by Okinawans to express comradeship and solidarity. In Okinawan culture, protecting a community implies maintaining interper-



sonal relationships in either a small group or an entire village. In Kayo, these values are evident in the way in which people conceptualise and react to social distance and social interaction.

## CONCLUSION

This article has described *uchi/soto* dynamics and used the example of Kayo and some of its inhabitants to show what kind of sociocultural internal measures people applied to re-shape accessibility and negotiate boundaries while adapting their social interactions and kinship relations during the emergency period. Kayo villagers followed lockdown procedures, abided by the law, and kept their community safe by restricting access. However, accessibility and sociability were redefined when it came to the locals, neighbours, or close friends who are not necessarily the common tourist, nor a member of one of the US military families that reside in Okinawa. Kayo villagers shifted and restructured their social boundaries cautiously and strategically to 'socially distance' themselves from 'others', while maintaining their kinship group.

This kind of social behaviour points to the underlying 'subtle social movements' that prioritise *uchi* relationships and reinforce social distancing (*soto*) from so-called uninvited guest. The beach or the coffee shop became spaces redefined by people's ideas regarding kinship, communal identity, and reciprocity. On the one hand, these actions were powerful enough to resist the "stay at home" measure implemented by Tokyo law. At the same time, they validated the village's gesture of putting up a signpost to discourage others from coming to the beach for amusement. To a certain extent, the pandemic allowed villagers to redefine accessibility to their space and refine social borders and kinship, albeit temporarily.

People's responses to the pandemic have a marked political dimension. For many, the hardships of the pandemic lead to a shift in their moral, social, and personal perspectives and in their meaning-making. Such changes in meaning-making are at the core of socio-cultural studies and anthropological research. The case study of Kayo and how the circumstances of the pandemic allowed the villagers to take back public space and redefine social boundaries are essential topics that, in my view, require further development.

Socio-cultural discourse is inseparable from political discourse. The present study can contribute to discussions on how human social behaviour manifests during a crisis, and specifically how social interactions between members of a rural community and 'outsiders' shift within this context. By doing so, it outlines some analytical proposals that could enrich comparative studies of the political and socio-cultural dimensions of the pandemic experience amidst populations historically engaged in the struggle for self-determination, focusing attention on how the pandemic lead one such population to reinforce its communal values and social practices. Furthermore, considering what I observed and learned from the people of Kayo who made this study possible, I have tried to demonstrate how this pandemic gave us an experience containing new knowledge (what it is like to live in a pandemic) that we could not have obtained otherwise, and has thus transformed us epistemically.

When we remain socially connected and culturally curious, we learn how others operate and we learn about customs, moral values, ethical conduct, traditions and symbolism, folk knowledge, and how the combination of these factors shapes people's behaviour. Understanding crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic as a phenomenon requires us to consider how sociality, culture, or kinship shape a given situation (Mullick and Das 2014). The way in which people deal with the pandemic depends upon how they relate this challenge to their understanding of culture, society, history, religion, their natural environment, politics, and collective course (Wohl et al. 2012). Experiencing the early stages of this pandemic while living in Kayo village provided me with the opportunity to observe how rural communities live and express ideas about social bonding, kinship, inside and outside, the coffee shop and friends, the beach and the village, and cultural ways of dealing with the pandemic crisis. Okinawans' response to COVID-19 is not surprising, as it is consistent with their sociocultural, colonial, and political history.

On occasion, Oga residents welcome the 'uninvited guest' into their space. In Kayo, villagers distance themselves from the 'guest' while deciding who is 'theirs' in their space. This action allows them, to a certain extent, to regain control and redefine social boundaries. Relationships between people involve gaining acceptance and support from others, caring for and protecting each other, and paying attention to each other. These are features that seem especially crucial to cultivating well-being in times of crisis.

#### NOTES

1 A symbolic figure related to disasters and epidemics.

2 All names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

3 For more details, see the Churashima Nature School official webpage.

#### SOURCES

FM = Author's fieldwork material

FM 2020: Kazuki = Personal communication, April 17th, 2020

FM 2020: Nada = Informal conversation, April 25th, 2020

FM 2020: Taiga = Personal communication, April 9, 2020

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