

# “Getting to Know the People of Izena” study tour

With Tamaki Shun'ichi we met all kinds of people on Izena and heard all kinds of stories.

✦ Please see the Photo Essay Cafe website for the full text of our interviews.  
<http://www.tjf.or.jp/photoessaycafe/>



Tamaki Shun'ichi, featured in the Deai resource. Shun'ichi grew up on the island until his graduation from junior high school. He studied Okinawan history and performing arts at a high school on the main island of Okinawa. He is a core member of the Izena Shoen drum troupe.

First, I'd like to sing *This Island I Love*, a song also introduced in *Deai* that expresses my feelings for the island. When I was in high school, I was devastated by the gradual destruction of the island's beautiful landscape. It made me sad to see the island change, and I wrote this song as a way to leave something of the island for the future.

Why has there been this destruction of the natural landscape? It's a difficult problem. To survive on this island, we need to work. And one type of work we have is construction. In order to create more jobs on the island, we need to keep developing. In addition, global warming and other problems that all human beings have in common have also had an effect.

After that experience with *Deai*, I decided to go on to study at the Okinawan Prefectural University of Arts. I majored in Okinawan classical music (vocal and *sanshin*\*)

in college, particularly on accompaniment to *kumiodori*, a type of Ryukyu opera that was developed during the time of the Ryukyu kingdom. It's been great playing classical Okinawan music because the lyrics teach me how Okinawan people used to think. One song has affected me deeply. These are the lyrics: "A beautiful flower cannot bloom beautifully until it has passed a cold, cold winter."

I graduated from college last year, and now, while continuing my playing of classical Okinawan music, I am working as a singer-songwriter. I've felt lost in the past, but I feel happiest when I create my own work and express it. I think this is what suits me most, so I'd like to keep writing songs and singing, and hopefully to succeed in it.



\**sanshin*: A three-stringed plucked lute introduced from China during the late fourteenth to early fifteenth centuries.



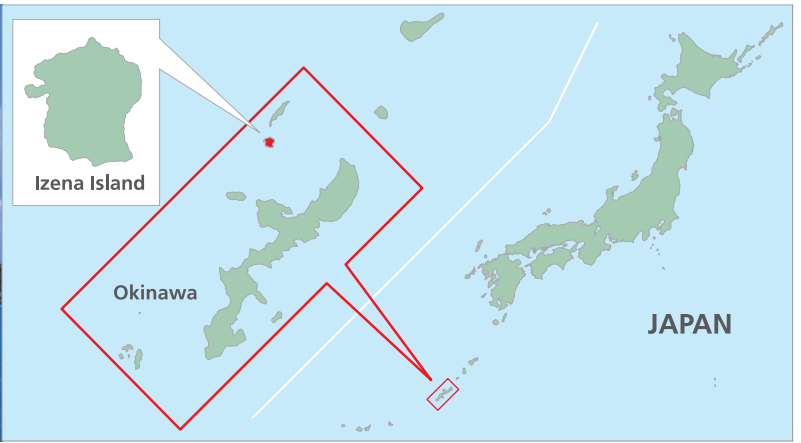
Shun'ichi's high school classmate, Koshin. Also from Izena, who appears in Shun'ichi's story in the *Deai* resource.

I am working for a fish wholesaler on main island of Okinawa. I set the day's prices of fish that I buy on auction. We size up its "nice body," if you know what I mean, slicing off a bit of the tail to get an image of the rest of the meat on the tuna . . . We have a lot of differ-

ent clients, and I think they like me because of my kind of cheery and high-tension humor. Working, I'm always thinking "I'm doing this because our customers like me," and it's their attachment that keeps me going. I have no plans to return to Izena island in the future. Rather, I think I can do a better job of promoting the island by making a name for myself outside of it. Lastly, I think it's important to like yourself regardless of how tough a situation you're in. That's how you can continue making yourself better.



Izena Island



Maeda Seigi



#### Maeda Seigi, Izena village mayor

The island covers an area of 15.42 square kilometers and its circumference is 16 km. We have a population of 1,860 people. The major industries of the island are agriculture, fishing, and commerce. The average income of villagers is 1.78 million yen. That's about average for Okinawa.

The scope of our lives and economy on the island is limited, and we often feel these limits in the development of agriculture, fishing, and commerce. What we would like to

do now is to develop the tourism industry further. On May 15, 2003 we declared Izena Village a "tourism village," and appointed renowned local artist Naka Bokunen to be our first tourism ambassador. With the aim of getting island residents and visitors alike to value, protect, and be advocates of the island's natural beauty, we adopted the Izena Village Environmental Cooperation Tax (a fee of 100 yen for each entry to the island), a first of its kind in Japan. Thanks to the understanding and cooperation of residents and visitors, awareness of the importance of maintaining a clean environment has been spreading, and the village has become increasingly clean.

Ayako



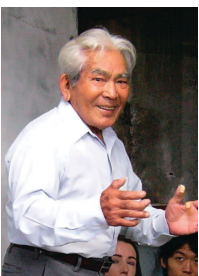
#### Shun'ichi's mother, Ayako. Ayako is the mother of six boys, including Shun'ichi.

Shun'ichi is the type to rush recklessly into things. Since he started participating in the Shoen drum troupe, I think his energies have found a positive direction. He'd been saying he wanted to

become a singer and songwriter ever since he was in junior high school, so I hope his dream will come true. I think it's great if he's able to continue pursuing what he wants to do regardless of whether he is successful in the business or not.



Zenchu



Shun'ichi's grandfather, Zenchu. He takes care of one of the sacred sites of the local community, a responsibility that has been passed down within his family for generations. The sacred site is located right inside the grounds of the family residence.

In the back of this chamber there are three rocks that have been here since time immemorial. They embody the Fire God. This family has had the responsibility of honoring this deity since long ago. I pray for an abundant harvest. People of the village come here to pray for their health.







Naka Bokumen, famous Izena-born woodblock print artist and expert on the nature and history of the island. He also acts as tourism ambassador for the village of Izena.

This is *kikkobaka*. Shaped like a tortoise's shell, it illustrates the uniquely Okinawan ideal of a grave. In Okinawa, it is believed that in the next life, one lives with

one's family, just like in this life. Thus death is not an end but an entrance into another world, zone, or stage. On Izena, this was traditionally called *shidiru*, which has the same meaning as an egg hatching or a larvae turning into a butterfly. People in the same clan who are related to each other by blood are interred in the same grave. The reason it looks very sturdy is because it represents a house. It's as sturdy as a regular house would be. The shape has a very soft feeling, though, doesn't it? It's made in the image of a mother's womb. This is because it is believed that when one dies, one goes through the womb again to return to the original world. There is the idea that we go on to the next step as in the idea of *shidiru*, but there is also the view



that we return to where we came from. That swell represents a prolific womb.

In Okinawa, there is a basic belief in ancestor worship, but I think it might be a little different from religion. I guess it's a form of ancestor worship that has existed in Okinawa for ages. Actually, it's a combination of beliefs introduced from China and Korea as well.

This is *umi gitara*.

*Gitara* means bluffs.

And that over there

is *agi gitara*. A long

time ago, there was a

couple in love. They

prayed to the gods

to become one, and

they did. They be-

lieved they had attained absolute happiness. But after they

had become one, they could not feel their love for each

other. Once they were no longer apart, they couldn't tell

the other's feelings. They started to have doubts. "If we

don't like each other, we'd rather die than stay together.

But before we die, we want to remember what it was like

to love one another," they thought, and threw themselves

into the ocean. At that moment, the gods saved them and

said, "If they love each other, it is important for a man and

a woman to maintain a certain distance. It is vital that your

bodies remain separate when you love someone. Being

apart is actually the closest thing to being together. That

is, if you are in love, being apart is the same as being to-

gether." What this means is that though you may fall in

love and want to become one with the other person, you

are loving that person as a separate being, so you have to

recognize that fact. The woman became *umi gitara* (sea

bluff) and the man became *agi gitara* (land bluff). Gazing

at each other from a close distance, they are forever in love.



Shun'ichi's friend, Toshikazu. Leader of the Izena Shoen drum troupe. He now works in the planning department of the Izena village office.

The Shoen drum troupe was established in 1988. It was started because we realized that there were no events

or cultural activities named after our famous king Shoen. It is my job to organize the village's cultural festivals and events, promote understanding of the island among non-residents, and fill the island with tourists!



Shun'ichi's friend, Yoshiaki. Vice leader of Izena Shoen drum troupe.

What I've found from drumming for 17 years, participating in drumming events in and outside of the island, is that my encounters with people have been the most important to me. I've

been drumming with Shun'ichi since he was in junior high school. He's grown up now. I hope he'll take on a leadership role and instruct younger drummers.





Shun'ichi's friend, Teru. Member of Izena Shoen drum troupe. He is also a heavy metal guitarist.

For me, music is a part of my life, and because of it, I can get through anything. I'd like to be able to play and enjoy other kinds of music with people besides rock, like folk. While I'm on the island, I like help-

ing younger kids find new opportunities through music. I think it would be great if we could enliven the island with music.

You asked me how long I have been growing my hair. Well, I started growing it out when I was eighteen, and then I cut it once when I was twenty. I had just suffered a setback in my music, and I felt I needed a fresh start. (Shun'ichi: "But, hey, you were still growing out the back part.") Yeah, well, I couldn't let go completely (laughing).



"Sea Ranger" Leader, Keiichi. The Sea Rangers are a group of the island's young people, led by Keiichi, who came up with these mascot superhero characters after trying to think of a way to better promote Izena in a way that would be entertaining and memorable for everyone involved.

The greatest thing about being a Sea Ranger is being liked not only by little kids, but having an appeal to older men and women as well. Just like I've been able to be a Sea Ranger, this is an island where we have

a lot of different opportunities. I want to let children know that anything is possible, and to provide them with an environment in which they can grow.



Craig is an Assistant Language Teacher from Scotland. He came to Izena through the JET program\* to help teach English as an ALT (assistant language teacher) at Izena Elementary School and Junior High School.

The warmth and strength of the people here has greatly impressed me. Although they have faced adversity in the past and still do in some ways, they con-

tinue to be cheerful and welcoming while maintaining their strong and unique cultural traditions.

One of the things that impressed me first was how vigorous their culture and traditions are. Coming from a place where tradition is often shunned and seen as stuffy and old-fashioned, this was refreshing. One of my favorite things about Izena is the community spirit. A place where people don't need to lock their doors is certainly a good place. Truly I cannot imagine a better place to bring up children. To me it seems like the island is one big happy family.

\*The JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) program: It coordinates efforts by the prefectures, ordinance-designated cities, and other municipalities to invite overseas youth to Japan so as to have them teach foreign languages and/or participate in international exchange activities.

### Staff of the Izena Fishery Association at a Tokobushi Farm

The main characteristic of the fishing industry on Izena island is that 90 percent of earnings come from *mozuku* seaweed. The rest is from fish and shellfish harvest. *Mozuku* is harvested after it has grown for half a year. To provide some income for the intervening months, we decided to start *tokobushi* (a type of abalone) farming, since *tokobushi* can be harvested throughout the year. It's been three years since we started growing *tokobushi*, but we're still unable to mass-produce. There are about one million at the point eggs are laid, but only about half of them grow to be two centimeters in diameter. Our next task is to figure out how

to beat these odds. What's the best part of this job is being able to watch the process of the *tokobushi*, which I love, as they grow.

