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# **Organic sources for the revitalization of rural Japan**

## **The craft potters of Sado**

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# Organic sources for the revitalization of rural Japan

## The craft potters of Sado

By Peter Matanle

### Abstract

The population and society of Sado Island are declining at an alarming rate. Much of this decline has been due to endemic outward migration of the island's younger people to Japan's large urban areas in search of opportunities for tertiary education and salaried employment. Even though opportunities to find work in Sado do exist, these are in occupations that younger people currently find unattractive. Moreover, education in Sado currently does not serve local circumstances and needs well, being organised primarily by and for the urban centre. This research starts by presenting an overview of the issues surrounding population, education, and employment on Sado, and then moves to presenting a case study of the life and work Sado Island's craft-potters. The article uses statistical data from official bodies and unstructured interviews with the island's residents as empirical support for its theoretical discussions. The article concludes by hinting at a possible stabilization of the population through a combination of educational reform, craft-based employment re-generation, and taking advantage of emerging trends in world tourism.

**Key words:** Sado Island, rural revitalization, craft industries, employment, secondary education, sustainability.

### Author Biography

Dr Peter Matanle was born in Kenya in 1964 and gained his PhD from the University of Sheffield's School of East Asian Studies, where he is presently employed as Lecturer in Japanese Studies. From 2004 to 2006 he was the recipient of a Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Post-doctoral research fellowship to Niigata University. He is the author of various publications in the sociology of work in Japan, including *Japanese Capitalism and Modernity in a Global Era: Re-fabricating Lifetime Employment Relations* (RoutledgeCurzon 2003), and co-editor with Wim Luning of *Perspectives on Work, Employment and Society in Japan* (Palgrave 2006). He is the founder and general editor of the *electronic journal of contemporary japanese studies*.

# Organic sources for the revitalization of rural Japan

## The craft-potters of Sado

### Introduction

There is an understandable tendency in the social sciences, and especially in area studies, sometimes to presuppose that societies, countries, and nations are inter-changeable and contiguous entities. Thus, when we assess, for example, the question of Japan's shrinking population, it is sometimes considered to be a somewhat recent development, or at least one that did not become widely apparent as a looming crisis until the 1990s. Yet, as we start to disentangle the concept of society from those of country and nation, and then begin to look more carefully at the various differentiated societies that exist in Japan, we may begin to notice that many rural societies in Japan are already declining, even perhaps collapsing, at an alarming rate, and have been in the process of such a precipitous decline for half a century or more.

One such society or locale, that of Sado Island, lies approximately 30 kilometres off the north-west coast of Honshu in Niigata Prefecture. During the Edo period, possessing the third largest gold mine in the world, it was the source of much of the *Bakufu*'s wealth and was controlled directly from Edo. While the island is most popularly known in Japanese history for being an open prison to which political enemies and criminals were dispatched, and is considered by many Japanese people nowadays to be a remote and forgotten corner of their country, during the Edo period it was one of Japan's most dynamic regions. Thus, although in 2005 there were just 8,599 people living in the village of Aikawa (Sado-shi 2006, internet), where the gold mine is located, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century it is thought that there were as many as 100,000 people, the majority of whom were convicts working in the mine itself.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The figure for Edo period Aikawa was quoted in interview with an official of the prefectural branch office in Sado Island.

In its scope this research is grounded in sociology and the sociology of work. Being the first stage in an ongoing project on Sado Island's contemporary circumstances, the article is primarily exploratory, in that it investigates the relationships between educational institutions and practices, the processes of socio-economic development and globalization, and the work and roles of local independent craftspeople to present a case study in the continuing decline of Japanese rural society. Moreover, following in the footsteps of Willis's (1977) ground-breaking efforts in establishing the link between educational institutionalism and employment outcomes, the article is intended to be read at the intersection between theory and praxis in that it gropes towards the penetration by individual and community agency of the structured subordination of rural life to the priorities of the urban centre.

Through the use of statistical data collected by official bodies and unstructured interviews with local craft-potters, educators, local officials, and residents for its empirical foundations, the article uses the society of Sado Island as its backdrop because, contrary to many people's current knowledge, the island has a rich endowment in terms of its natural and cultural resources. These include a vibrant artistic and crafts culture, of which craft pottery is a central feature, as well as performance arts, among which is the world renowned Kodo *taiko* percussion group who are resident year-round. Accordingly, the article presents pottery as a case study of a variety of indigenous cultural forms that currently exist on the island to propose and reinforce the view that:

- local educational institutions and practices be made more responsive to local circumstances and needs,
- organic, meaning indigenous and authentic rather than contrived, forms of cultural, social, and environmental capital be used as the basic resource for employment regeneration, and
- rural revitalization efforts be targeted at the development of indigenous industries that provide prospects for the creation of self-sustaining communities with independence from the urban centre.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. The following section begins by sketching out the problem of Sado's population decline. By investigating why younger people may wish to migrate away, the section demonstrates that the primary reasons for the continued haemorrhaging of the island's human and social capital are in the perceived paucity among local residents of appealing educational and employment opportunities on the island. Following on from there, the next section presents a case study of the life and work of some of the island's craft-potters in order to demonstrate the potential for these types of industries to contribute to the regeneration of attractive employment opportunities in rural areas. Before concluding, the final discussion section will frame the research within theories of work and identity in contemporary society as well as suggest some possibilities for the future.

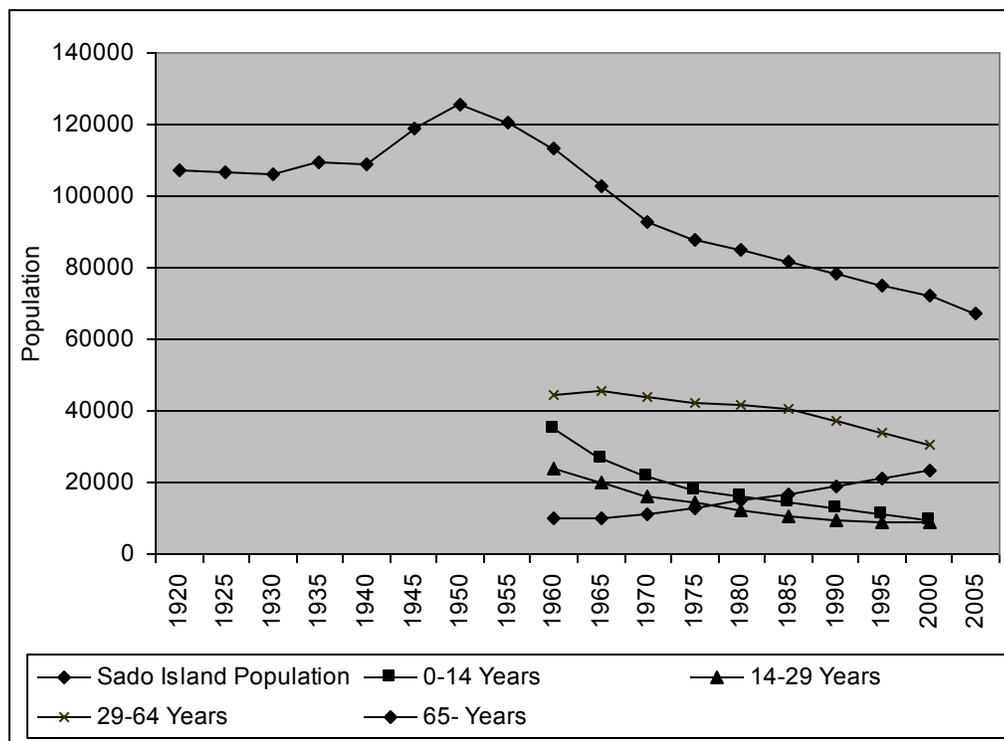
## **Sado Island in 2006: Population, Education, and Employment**

### *Population*

The most glaring manifestation of the decline of Sado society is in the sustained fall in the island's population over the past 55 years. Figure 1 below shows Sado's population from a stable pre-war level of approximately 110,000 people, through its post-war peak of 125,597 people in 1950, to the 2005 figure of 67,384, representing a fall of 46 per cent since 1950 and of 39 per cent since 1920. Figure 1 also shows that the population decline since 1960 is mostly due to a decrease in the number of younger people, while the decline among middle aged people, the age at which someone might contemplate a 'U-Turn' (see below), also shows a long term fall which has accelerated in recent years. Figure 1 also shows that the number and proportion of older people is steadily increasing and in the near future, as the baby-boom generation retires and passes away, will reach its peak and turn downwards. The slight

downward steepening of the Sado population curve between 2000 and 2005 may be a forewarning of the effects of this expectation on the whole island’s demography. To put these figures into their national context, we should note that the 46 per cent decrease in Sado’s population occurred at the same time as a 51 per cent increase in the population of Japan from approximately 84 million to 127.5 million between 1955 and 2005 (Statistics Bureau 2004: 11 and 2006, internet).

Figure 1: Population of Sado Island 1920-2005 (Total population and by age group)



Sources: Niigata-ken (2005a) and Sado-shi<sup>2</sup> (2006, internet).

Note: Figures for the 29-64 age group were calculated by subtracting the 14-29 age group from the 14-64 age group in the Sado-shi data. The population of Sado Island at the time of the national census in 2005 was estimated to be 67,384, a drop of 4,789 (6.6%) people from 2000 (Sado-shi 2006, internet) (Sado figures taken from the National Census).

<sup>2</sup> Sado City is the English translation of Sado-shi and refers to the local administrative entity of Sado Island. In 2004 the 10 local authorities of the island were merged to form a single Sado City. The word ‘city’ does not refer to the place’s character, but to the local administrative unit.

Comparing Sado with Niigata Prefecture and Japan as a whole, in 2004 34.4 per cent of Sado's population was 65 and over, the highest for any region of Niigata (23.3%),<sup>3</sup> 53.5 per cent were between 15 and 64, the lowest for the prefecture, and only 12.2 per cent were 14 or under, again the lowest (Niigata-ken 2005c: 10). Just under 60 per cent of households had an older person among their members, as against 32.2 per cent for all of Japan, and 11.8 per cent of households in Sado were of older people living alone, as against 6.5 per cent for Japan (Sado-shi 2006 internet).<sup>4</sup> In 2004 53.5 per cent of the Sado population was of child bearing age as against 62.9 per cent for Niigata Prefecture, and 66.9 per cent for Japan as a whole (Sado-shi 2006 internet). The birth rate was 6.9 per thousand population (8.2), and the death rate was 13.8 per thousand (9.1).

Although Moen (2002: 436), in his research in nearby Yamagata Prefecture, claims that 'increasing numbers of the sons and daughters of farm families are returning to their natal towns and villages from often prolonged stays in major metropolises' and breathing 'new life into regional towns and villages', and there is a small amount of evidence for this so-called 'U-Turn' phenomenon in Sado, there is a net outward movement of people from the island (Sado-shi 2006 internet). In 2004 2,034 people migrated to the island (1,007 from Niigata Prefecture, 1,022 from elsewhere in Japan, and 5 from overseas), and 2,237 migrated out (1,137 to Niigata Prefecture, 1,086 to elsewhere in Japan, and 8 overseas), representing a net outflow of 203 for the year (Niigata-ken 2005c: 41).

Given all of the above, and with an average age of 49 years and a current life expectancy of 77.7 years for men and 85 years for women (Niigata-ken 2005a), it is therefore no exaggeration to suggest that, within the next thirty years, the population of Sado Island may fall to approximately 30-35,000 people. If this takes place it will indicate a decline over the space of just three or four generations of approximately 75 per cent of the 1950 population. While not wishing to imply that the low birth rate is unimportant, for the purposes of this article, I will concentrate on outward migration, since only by

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<sup>3</sup> Where not explicitly stated, figures in brackets are for Niigata Prefecture as a whole.

<sup>4</sup> See the following Sado City internet page for more data, <http://www.city.sado.niigata.jp/admin/toukei/sisuu/sizen.html>.

younger people remaining as residents and working on the island can there be any realistic hope of re-establishing a vibrant society.

From the perspective of those who are themselves somewhat insulated from the problem, it is tempting to suggest that a fall in Japan's population might not be a problem at all (*Economist* 2006), or may even be a blessing in disguise (Caldararo 2003). However, the circumstances of life in such communities can become unbearable for those that remain. The winter of 2005-2006 saw record snowfalls all over north-western Japan, more than four metres in depth in some areas of Niigata, cutting off whole communities for days at a time and freezing vital water supplies. In such conditions older people find it impossible to perform the simplest of tasks and are either overly dependent on the kindness of younger relatives and neighbours or, in their absence, may become completely housebound. It is relevant that, as of 12 January 2006, nationwide 81 people had died and 1,944 had been injured in accidents due to the heavy snow, with most of these being older men in rural areas who had fallen from their roofs while attempting to clear away the snow (*NHK* 2006). When local businesses close due to their owners dying or becoming too infirm, as is increasingly occurring, people may be left without crucial goods and services. The spiral of decline intensifies as those that are able abandon their homes, and the rest are left behind to fend for themselves. In an age when the central government under Prime Minister Koizumi is pressing forward the privatization of publicly owned services, such as the post office, these problems can only intensify.

In every interview I conducted the assumption that there is a lack of appealing educational and employment opportunities was cited for young people leaving the island. In only one case did a respondent question this perception. The following quotation is a series of comments pasted together from an interview with a section manager in the prefectural government office in Sado. In my experience it best represents local people's perceptions.

I am a native of Sado and I love this place ... Although I work here now, I actually joined the prefectural government in Niigata City before being able to come back to Sado. So, I suppose you can say that I am a 'U-Turner'. ... The reason that most young people leave to go elsewhere is that there are very few jobs in Sado Island for them these days. They don't want to work in agriculture, forestry and fishing because these are hard jobs which produce only a low income. Young people think of these jobs as being like the famous '3K' jobs, which means jobs that are dirty, difficult, and dangerous.<sup>5</sup> If they could gain a higher income, maybe some people might do it. ... many young people may not want to work in tourist related work because the hours are hard, having to get up very early and not being able to finish till late at night with hotel work. Also, you don't get any independence and it's not very interesting. The pay is usually very low unless you own the business yourself. I stayed in a local hotel recently and the only people working there that I could see were older people. ... It seems to me that younger people most want to do desk work and there's not much of that around here. So they go and look for that kind of work in Niigata and Tokyo.

However, the following respondent questions some of these assumptions.

Everyone always says that there is no work in Sado Island, but most of them have a job [laughs]! ... I am a car mechanic and I really love fishing. I am 30 years old and I worked for a few years in Naoetsu in the south of Niigata. But it wasn't interesting. I wanted to come back to Sado as I really love this island. So I bought a fishing boat and now I have two jobs. I have recently taken on an apprentice [*deshi*] on my boat. ... winter is the best season for fishing as the fish are especially tasty at this time. It's very cold at sea and I can understand why few people want to do it. You have to really love it. Most of my school year group went away to the big

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<sup>5</sup> 3K refers to *kitanai*, *kitsui*, *kiken*; or dirty, difficult and dangerous.

cities. Some come back for the summer *obon* festival and for New Year, and they say how they miss living here and how they don't have good jobs ... but they don't want to do this work either.

Other reasons for younger people wishing to leave the island are explained by the following three respondents (a craft potter, a middle school teacher, and a local businessman).

There are no universities here ... well, I think recently a *senmon gakkô* (specialist training college) for nurses opened, but other than that there is nothing. So, anyone who wants to continue in education must leave the island. Once there they usually don't want to come back. ... Also, the education most people get in school and university is completely unsuited to working in the jobs that we do here. Teachers insist that you obey them in learning useless facts for exams. Probably they [young people who have gone to university] couldn't find work [that they could do] even if they did come back [laughs]!

People want to graduate from a good university. That is the standard route to getting a good job, so most people want to attend a university in Tokyo or Niigata. They then find jobs in the cities they move to, they get married and have children and then can't return, even if they wanted to. That's what happened to me. I left for those reasons as I had decided to be a teacher. So I entered Niigata University [in Niigata City]. After graduating I got married to someone from nearby and now I teach at [a] middle school here in [Niigata Prefecture]. Of course, I go back to Sado now and again.

Life in rural areas is really inconvenient. Did you know that there isn't even a cinema on the whole island! Look around, there is nothing here except fields and mountains [laughs]! ... yes, you are right that it is a beautiful place, but the winter is very cold. Plus, for some people who

commute to Niigata City, the ferry is often suddenly cancelled [due to poor weather] ... Family businesses are closing down because the owners are dying ... local people can't afford to live like they used to. With the drop in tourist numbers there's less money ... It's expensive to bring up a child and then send [him/her] to university in Tokyo. We could do that before, when there were local companies and people took home a full time salary and the wife also worked part-time ... But now everyone has to work for the chain-businesses as a part-time worker on low pay. There are many convenience stores here now where before they were family-run shops. The managers of these businesses are sometimes even people sent from Niigata as *tanshin funin*,<sup>6</sup> rather than people recruited here. ... now you need three [people's incomes] to get by. So, people don't have lots of children and young people just move away to Tokyo where they can get a good job.

Net out-migration might therefore more usefully be seen as a combination of both push and pull. The former is represented principally by there being almost no tertiary educational institutions and few employment opportunities in occupations in which younger people wish to be employed, and the latter by more numerous and more attractive employment, education, and lifestyle, or consumer, choices being available elsewhere. Unsurprisingly, it seems that younger people are not happy to engage in work that they feel requires hard physical labour in poor conditions for poor financial returns, work that provides few opportunities for personal growth and independence, or work that involves working long and inconvenient hours. For, as one respondent above reveals (and the statistical data below also indicate), there are jobs in Sado for people that are prepared to do them.

Research produced by the Niigata Prefectural government bears out the statements above. Since 1980, and by a large margin, the two principle reasons cited by younger people for leaving the

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<sup>6</sup> *Tanshin funin* means to be sent away to work for some time (often years at a time) from one's family and normal place of employment. Often people will live during the week in company dormitories (*shataku*) and go home on the odd weekend to be with their families.

prefecture have been for reasons of education and employment, with employment being the reason cited by more than 50 per cent of respondents in recent years. The prefecture cites both harsh employment conditions in the prefecture and better employment conditions in Tokyo as the principle push and pull factors (Niigata-ken 2005b: 10-11). Indeed, Suda, Ohtsuka and Nishida (1988) in their research described how rural-urban migration in search of salaried employment has been the principal reason for outward migration from Japanese rural areas since the 1960s. The following sub-sections examine why people may have these understandings about their opportunities and reveals much about the institutional structuration of rural-urban migration.

### *Education*

It is well known that education at all pre-tertiary institutions in Japan must conform to instructions issued from the Ministry of Education in Tokyo and implemented locally. All classroom textbooks must be pre-approved by the ministry and then selected from a group of approved texts by the local boards of education. These texts are national in scope, sometimes nationalist in tone, almost invariably focus on modern and national developmentalist objectives, and hardly address issues specific to Sado Island in particular or rural Japan in general. In addition, time available for digressing from teaching to the text-book is restricted by Japanese schools' fact-based and exam-preparation centred pedagogy. One middle school teacher says this.

Of course we try to teach our students to love Sado and to want to continue living here and we do this in the *sôgô gakushû*<sup>7</sup> time as well as at other times. But there are so many competing priorities for the students' time. ... Please understand that it is also right that we teach the students that they are Japanese, that for example Tokyo is the capital region and what happens

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<sup>7</sup> Called variously in English: General Education, Integrated Learning, Synthetic Education.

there is important in their [the students'] lives. It is good for the students to have knowledge of all of Japan and the world too, history and so on, especially if they will end up in Tokyo anyway.

Further, each prefectural board of education has responsibility for the allocation of teachers to local schools and operates a policy whereby younger teachers, wherever they may come from and especially if they are unmarried or at least without children, are often placed in schools in remote and under-populated areas, such as Sado, in order to gain experience and to compensate for the fact that older and married teachers may not wish to work in such areas.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, there exists the odd situation whereby young people from Sado who become teachers may end up in other areas of Niigata Prefecture, as with the married respondent above, and some of the teachers in Sado schools are originally from other more urban areas of the prefecture, with little knowledge of the specific needs of the local community and little time to research those needs.

Nevertheless, there are some small signs that local issues are being addressed at the institutional level. Recently the Sado City Board of Education has started collaborating with a team of scholars from Niigata University to write a supplementary textbook specifically for use in local schools. This is how one of the scholars described the project:

No, this is not a textbook in the normal sense. It is a sub-textbook. You see, the Ministry must licence all main textbooks, but the local board of education can still produce sub-texts for use together with the main texts. In the following months we will visit Sado to learn more about the circumstances of the area, how people live, how they think. ... We are preparing a sub-textbook in social studies that looks at local circumstances, the economy and so on. It is very important for local people to learn more about their area.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with middle school teacher elsewhere in Niigata prefecture.

In addition, education policy at the national level, belated though it may be, is inching slowly towards recognizing the importance of developing a sense of rootedness in time and place among Japanese children through the implementation of *yutori kyôiku*, loosely translated as ‘relaxed education’, and, from 2002, *sôgô gakushû* classes that give schools the opportunity to be able to integrate their formal education into their specific individual and local needs. Critics have pointed out that the Ministry neglects to clarify what it means by, for example, developing ‘individuality’, and this ambiguity allows for a wide range of interpretations and practices, including a more business friendly and neo-liberal agenda (Cave 2001: 173). In addition, the Ministry’s own guidelines in other areas may have a tendency to contradict and cancel out efforts being made locally, for example in the rigid insistence on singing the national anthem and raising the national flag and, recently, discussions over how to teach children to ‘love’ their country (*Japan Times* 2006, internet). Moreover, the Ministry of Education remains very cautious in its approach to reform (Cave 2001) and it is still not certain whether any of these measures are bearing fruit, as one teacher from elsewhere in Niigata Prefecture pointed out:

... even if schools do what they are supposed to with these classes, they are outside the mainstream curriculum and the content is not in the entrance exams. Most of our students won’t take its content really seriously unless it is incorporated into the mainstream curriculum and the exams. Also, many teachers don’t really know what to do with this time. The content is sometimes vague. I wonder how useful the classes really are.

Indeed, it is also well known that, where employment is concerned, Japanese society has placed a strong emphasis on educational credentials in preparation for salaried employment in urban areas (Ishida, Spilerman, and Su 1997; Okano and Tsuchiya 1999; Takeuchi 1997; Yano 1997). Although, for example, Japanese craftspeople have a distinguished history, correctly occupy a celebrated position in Japanese material culture, and are well known and admired worldwide, on the whole Japanese

society prefers to guide children towards being accepted into the most prestigious universities (nearly all located in urban areas along the *Tōkaidō*<sup>9</sup>) and thence salaried employment in the most prestigious work organizations. In this way, it seems that young people's lives are structured towards following this normative pattern from an early age, wherever they come from in Japan, and that each new generation of parents, teachers, and students then reproduces and reinforces, or structurates, this life-path for theirs and the next generation. The following is what a middle school teacher reports.

About seven or eight out of ten of our students eventually leave the island to find work or enter university. Also, our high schools can't teach students with exceptional needs, so some leave even earlier. Last year one, who is a runner, went to high school in Niigata. Usually one or more who are academically good will go to high school in Niigata and then to university in Tokyo. The rest will go to a Sado high school and then move away to university or get a job ... Yes, I agree that society [*seken*] guides students towards university and big companies. But, it would not be fair to keep them here if they don't want to stay.

Thus, it can be said that Japan's post-war educational institutions have served as a giant mechanism for corralling young people and then herding them into the urban centre where they are sorted for employment according to their perceived academic status (McVeigh 2000 and 2002; Okano and Tsuchiya 1999; Takeuchi 1997; Yano 1997). While serving the needs of the elites' developmentalist project well throughout the post-war period, especially since millions of rural young people were able to gain secure, skilled, and well paid employment in manufacturing industry, these institutions may not be so well suited to the problems currently being experienced in local areas, as well as the transformations currently occurring in the urban labour force. For, stable and skilled manufacturing employment is fast disappearing in Japan, as elsewhere in the developed world, as

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<sup>9</sup> The Edo period land route between Edo (Tokyo) and Osaka along which are to be found many of Japan's main cities.

China becomes the centre of world manufacturing, and is being replaced by unskilled, insecure, and underwhelming service employment, often in the retail and restaurant trades (Dolby and Dimitriadis (eds) 2004; Honda 2006; Genda 2005; Genda and Maganuma 2004). Since the graduates of Sado's schools are among the least likely to have the background and resources to be able to enter Japan's elite educational institutions, in all likelihood the employment prospects awaiting many of the young people who move away from rural areas are not what they used to be.

Moreover, during the post-war decades, normative understandings of the relative roles of siblings, and having multiple children families, made sure that the demands of the national developmentalist growth regime could be satisfied while at the same time preserving much of the social capital and cohesion of local areas, because the eldest sons, or daughters, would be available to remain at home or would return after being recalled by their parents to take over the family land and/or business (see interview extracts below). As evidence to support the stability of this bargain, even as the population of Tokyo and other urban areas expanded greatly during the long post-war economic expansion, the population of Niigata Prefecture remained steady at around 2.4 million people (Niigata-ken 2005a), thus enabling a somewhat stable rural-urban migratory relationship to develop. This human resource bargain between urban capital and rural labour has all but been mined out by Japan's huge corporations, as even the eldest sons and daughters leave Sado permanently for elsewhere, as Sado's remaining residents have fewer children per couple, and as Japan's corporations cannot wait for Japan's natural and human resources to reproduce themselves and concentrate on shifting their production facilities overseas in search of lower cost regimes (See Brennan 2000 and Wallerstein 2001). The following interview extract with a Sado City government official bears out this last point.

Yes, you are right. The city does try to rent out empty houses and businesses on behalf of the owners through our website. In most cases these are owned by people living in Tokyo, for example, who are the eldest child but whose parents have passed on. They don't want to let the

house decay and maybe they aim to live there when they retire, or come back eventually as ‘U-Turners’. We want people to come and live here, too. So we thought that we should put the two objectives together and rent them [the houses and businesses] out on behalf of the owners. ... I don’t know exactly how much the rent costs, and I think each place is different. But I am sure it is not expensive.

Lastly on this subject, it is significant that, in addition to the lack of tertiary level education in Sado, investment in pre-tertiary education is running at about half the average for Niigata Prefecture as a whole. In 2004 public investment in education in Sado stood at 586,621 yen per primary level child and 507,395 yen for middle school, as against 1,023,423 yen and 1,063,588 yen respectively for the prefecture as a whole (Sado-shi 2006 internet). In such circumstances, and to sum up this discussion, it would be difficult to disagree with Knight (2000: 341) when he refers to Japan’s rural areas as being a mere ‘derivative space wholly subordinate to the megalopolis’.

### *Economy and Employment*

In this sub-section I will present the principle macro-economic and employment indicators for Sado Island. Except where shown, all of the data is taken from the Sado City website (Sado-shi 2006 internet). In addition, I will present some statistical data on the current state of the island’s pottery industry in preparation for the content of the next section.

In just five years, between 1998 and 2003, the domestic product of Sado Island declined by 10.5 per cent to 2.323 billion yen. Most of this decline was due to a fall in manufacturing and construction. While production among the primary industries of farming, forestry and fisheries has fallen over the same period, the rate of fall has recently slowed, with a small rise achieved in 2002-03. In addition, tertiary service industries have remained steady, producing 72 per cent of the island’s product in 2003,

with financial and insurance services growing by 35 per cent over the five year period. Much of this growth is almost certainly a result of the ageing of the population and the implementation of compulsory contributions for nursing care insurance for all people over 40 years of age from 1 April 2000, as stipulated in the Nursing Care Insurance Law of 1997 (Statistics Bureau 2004: 177-180). Due to these developments, and the ongoing changes in Sado society detailed above, general services and government related services have now overtaken construction as the island's principle industries.

Tourism has been one of the island's principal money earners, and although a rise of 17,000 visits was achieved in 2005, recent years have seen a steady fall in the number of visitors to the island, with effects on support services such as hotels, restaurants, transport, and souvenir sales. With the annual number of visitors peaking at 12.14 million in 1991, tourism to the island has nearly halved, down to just 6.77 million visits in 2005. The city's website laments the dearth of what it calls 'repeaters', implying that there is not enough of interest to excite someone to make a return visit. The interview extract below is from an interview with an official in the prefectural tourism and promotion office in Sado. Towards the end he gives an indication of how the tourist industry may be changing to Sado's long term advantage.

The number of tourists to the island has been dropping and this has had a big effect. Also, since you are interested in pottery, it has also caused a drop in souvenir sales for the island's kilns. ... The reasons for this are difficult for us to understand but there are some things we can say. Travel to Sado used to be in large groups, but most people are now travelling in smaller groups. That has caused a big fall. You can see car parks here with lots of spaces for coaches. Well, most of these go unused now. ... Also, it is now cheaper and easier to travel overseas. You can go to Korea or even Hawaii for about the same price. It takes about two hours to fly from Haneda Airport to Korea or Okinawa ... but to come to Sado you need to take the Shinkansen and then the ferry. That takes about 5 hours in all. ... Yes, we have an airport but when it was built there

was opposition to constructing it, about ten per cent of residents were against it. So there was a compromise and it was built with a shorter runway and planes from Tokyo can't land. ... We are trying to appeal to the new trend in tourism and re-market the island as an environmental and cultural destination, but as yet that is a new strategy and we can't yet say if it will work. ... No, this is not aimed yet at foreign tourists – though we are trying to appeal to people from China and Korea and Taiwan – but people from urban areas inside Japan who may be interested in [environment and culture]. For example, around Niigata City you may have seen the new series of posters that is intended to market the 100 Treasures of Sado. This is a new style of marketing for us.

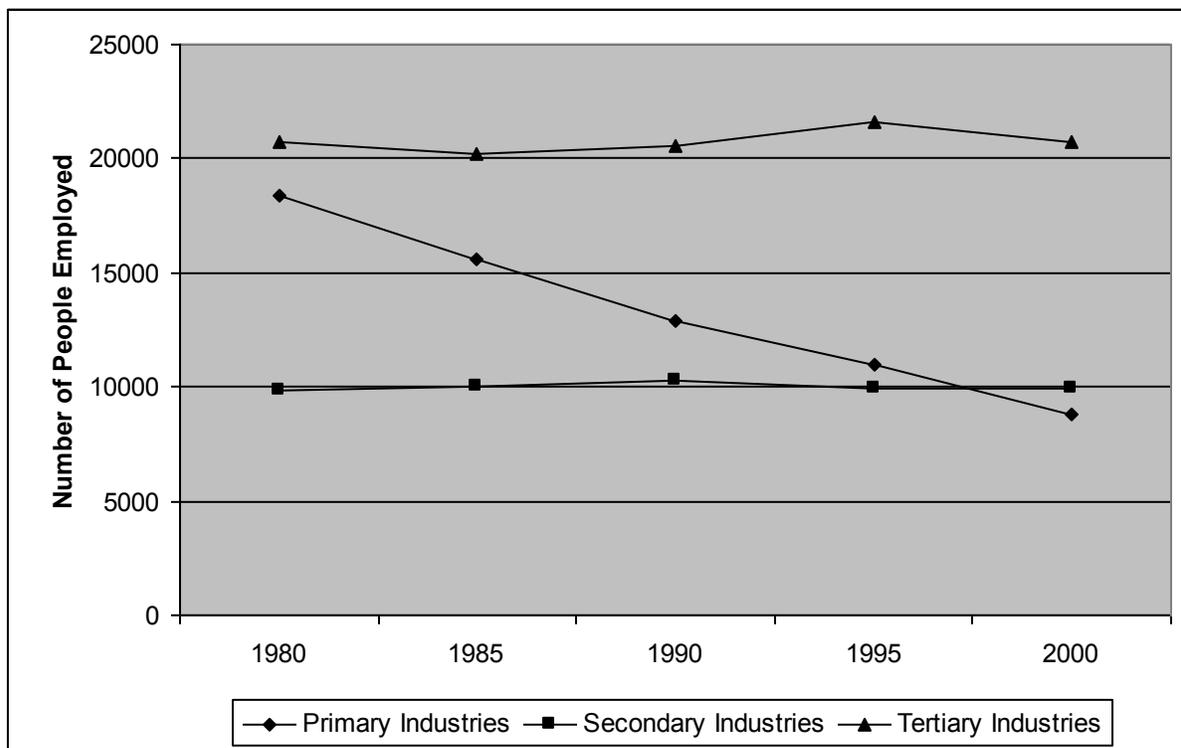
However, to support the fear that some tourist investment remains unappealing, the next comment, from a resident of Niigata City who had recently made a tourist trip to Sado with his family, described the somewhat contrived nature of some tourist sites.

I think that some of the tourist sites in Sado are a little strange. Actually, this is the case in many areas of Japan. Maybe you know that Sado is famous for Noh [theatre]. We visited the famous Noh theatre [there]. You can see robots performing Noh [laughs]! I felt uncomfortable and thought it was strange. These kinds of things are not really suitable for today's tourists, I think.

With regards to employment, as of 2000 there were 62,702 persons over 15 years of age resident in Sado Island. Of these, 64.1 per cent (62.4% for Niigata Prefecture) were counted as being active (Niigata-ken 2005a: 317). Of the latter, only 1.9 per cent (3.8%), or 768 persons, were completely unemployed, 82.8 per cent (83.2%) were working in the formal economy, and 13.6 per cent (10.9%),

were involved in home-making or other types of informal work.<sup>10</sup> Of those actively engaged, 7,626 people, or 22.7 per cent (12.0%), were self-employed and the rest were employees (Niigata-ken 2005: 317). Figure 2 shows that employment in the primary industries of agriculture, forestry, and fishing halved between 1980 and 2000, while employment in secondary and tertiary industries remained steady. This reflects the fact that a large number of people involved in primary industries on the island are older people and they are retiring and passing away now in greater numbers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that since 2000 there has been a fall in employment in secondary and an expansion in tertiary industries, as the population falls and ages, and the harsh economic climate begins to bite more deeply.

Figure 2: Employment in Sado by Industry

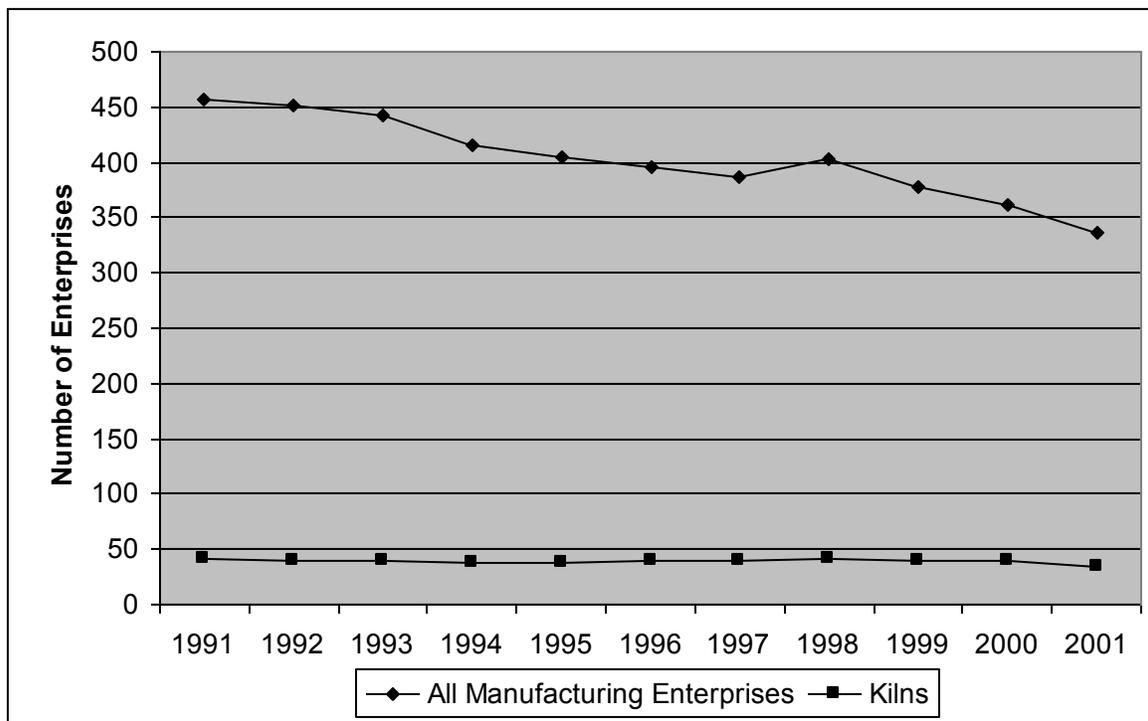


Source: Sado-shi (2006).

<sup>10</sup> The data does not add up to 100 per cent. It is possible that the remaining 704 people who are active but not included in the more detailed figures are so-called NEETs, or those Not in Employment, Education, or Training (See Genda 2004).

While manufacturing employment in Sado did not decrease between 1980 and 2000 (Figure 2), Figure 3 shows that the number of manufacturing establishments fell steadily over the period 1991 to 2001 by a factor of 26 per cent. Figures for all industries show that between 1994 and 2002 the number of small businesses on the island fell by 18 per cent to 1,436 establishments, and the number of people employed at these fell by 11 per cent to 5,705 employees, showing that employment is gradually becoming more concentrated in larger businesses, with many of these headquartered outside the island. Over the same period turnover had fallen by 12 per cent (JPY86 million or USD750,000) to an average of 123.5 billion yen per business. The number of small retail stores also fell by 19 per cent over the same period, while the number of retail subsidiaries and franchises dropped by only 9 per cent, leaving the total fall in retail stores at 18 per cent, with retail subsidiaries increasing their proportion.

Figure 3: Manufacturing Enterprises in Sado 1991-2001 (All enterprises and kilns)



Source: Sado-shi (2006 internet).

Figure 3 also shows the number of pottery kilns on the island remained steady until 1998. In 1991 and 1998 there were 42 kilns in operation (9.2% of all manufacturing enterprises in 1991 and 10.4% in 1998), yet by 2001 this figure had dropped 16.6 per cent to 35. Although this was a sharp decrease, it was still less than that for small retail stores and manufacturing businesses as a whole. Nearly all of these kilns are family run and consist of between 1 and 5 potters of up to three generations working together. The interview extract below with a local ceramic artist describes the importance of ceramics to the heritage of Sado Island, how the industry has responded to changes in demand over time, and how, as with nearly the whole economy on Sado Island, the pottery industry is beset by difficulty. Nevertheless, towards the end the extract he also gives a hint at what may be a potential source of renewal for the industry.

Ever since the establishment of the gold mine, clay has been a part of Sado Island. My ancestors were brought to Sado to make ventilation pipes for the mine workers from the clay produced by the mine. When the mine closed they turned to making bricks and roof tiles as there was a huge demand for these from all over Japan as it began its industrialization. But, demand for hand made tiles dried up once these things could be mass produced, and so my great-great-great-grandfather made ceramic wares for the hotel and restaurant trades and produced some artistic works as a hobby. ... But times change and hotels began to buy mass produced wares and so we turned to making souvenirs as our main business and art works as a side business. But, it is becoming harder as the tourist numbers decline. The souvenir [*omiyage*] trade is a big part of our business. Big coaches don't come here much now. We are trying to build a website [for e-commerce], but we are finding it hard to learn how to do it and it is still at an early stage.

With this heritage in mind, and linking in with earlier discussions about the importance of educational institutions in career building, the decline of the traditional family structure, and the

choice to migrate away, the following set of pasted together comments from an interview with a technology teacher at a middle school in Sado reveals some curious gaps in the island's educational infrastructure.

No, I don't think there is a kiln [at any of our schools]. At least, I think one or two schools may have a small metal [electric] kiln for occasional use, but there isn't one ... a climbing kiln [*noborigama*]. ... Pottery needs an enthusiastic teacher to teach it and our school is very small. We have only 20 or so students [in the school] and this has dropped from more than 50 students about ten years ago when it was built. There is only one technology and one art teacher. It depends on who we have as to what we can teach. ... Yes, I think that it is odd [not to have a kiln], because pottery has been important in Sado for a long time. ... pottery is a family business and families train the next generation in the traditional manner. Also, this is not a pottery making area like Aikawa. However, I hear that in Aikawa [middle school] the students study woodcut printing rather than pottery in their art classes because there is a famous teacher there. Come to think of it, that is a bit strange. ... We have not yet started work experience classes [*shokuba taiken*] but we are going to start that from next year. I hope that we can take some students to a pottery at that time. In the meantime there are one or two places where students can experience it for a day. ... Yes, I agree that it is not really long enough for students to get to know it.

Before moving on to the next section, where I will build on some of the issues presented above to present a theory for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under discussion, the following bulleted list gives a summarised breakdown of the reasons cited by respondents for the decline of Sado society and, particularly, for the chronic net out-migration of younger people.

Employment and Economy

- Few attractive employment opportunities in Sado.
- More numerous and more attractive employment opportunities elsewhere.
- A lack of awareness among young people of the opportunities that may be present in Sado.
- Poor economic conditions and a chronic decline in the island's domestic product.
- A creeping colonization of local business by chains headquartered elsewhere.
- A creeping colonization of full-time employment by personnel sent to the island.

#### Education

- Lack of tertiary educational institutions in Sado.
- Lack of specialized secondary institutions in Sado.
- A nationalist and developmentalist educational curriculum run from and for the urban centre.
- A comparative lack of personnel, infrastructure, and opportunity to teach to the island's particular circumstances.
- A lack of distance learning opportunities.

#### Living Conditions

- Geographical isolation and harsh climate, especially in winter.
- Comparative lack of transportation and leisure infrastructure.
- A general atmosphere of decline.
- A chronic ageing and shrinking of the population.
- Shrinking opportunities for romance and marriage.
- A partial breakdown in normative familial relations and responsibilities.

#### **Sado's Craft Potters: An example for local revitalization?**

No-one who professes more than a passing knowledge of Japanese society and aesthetics can fail to notice the complex relationship between art and technology in Japan's craft-industries. The inter-

generational transmission of skills and tacit knowledge, as well as an adherence to received custom, combined with a sharply innovative and entrepreneurial spirit and a willingness to borrow from outside, produces work of a consistently outstanding aesthetic and technical quality (Koseki 2005). In this way, for more than three hundred years the ceramics producers of Sado Island have successfully preserved and adapted their businesses according to their own needs and circumstances. Ironically, it is in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with increased access to the trappings of a society of immense wealth and technological advancement that these families, along with the rest of Sado Island, are declining. More ironically still, this comes at a time when, with the onward development of a globalized society, worldwide knowledge about and appreciation of Japanese ceramics has never been better.

In this section I will present more detail on the pottery industry in Sado Island. In so doing, in the next discussion section I will bring together the data presented in the article with theories of work and identity in modern society to show how indigenous work institutions, combined with a new approach to education and rural development, may work constructively towards a stabilization of the island's decline and, perhaps even, to re-creating a self-sustaining independent society in Sado.

We have already seen how the pottery industry in Sado has adapted to new economic realities as they have appeared. Yet, the industry is also deeply traditional, with the transmission of received custom and tacit knowledge interwoven with and embedded in the inter-generational reproduction of the Japanese household, or *ie*, which was and is itself the traditional repository for asset storage, labour pooling, mutual insurance, and socio-economic reproduction (Ariga 1954 and 1972; Nakane 1967). Although the *ie* has become a political as well as a socio-economic institution in the course of Japan's history, its basis as the method for the reproduction of the pottery businesses of Sado Island is under strain as the island's younger people continue to reject tradition in favour of modernity and move away to Japan's urban areas.

Ito Sekisui V (伊藤赤水五代目) is the 14<sup>th</sup> generation of ceramicists in his family and the fifth to call himself Ito Sekisui, evoking the distinctive ferrous red *Mumyoi* clay to be found in Aikawa

(Ojima 2004). In 2003 he was appointed by the Japanese government as a so-called 'Living National Treasure' for the quality and beauty of his ceramic art. The follow are extracts from an interview with him at his gallery in Aikawa.

My father died when I was 19 and I went to university in Kyoto to study industrial arts. Actually I didn't really study ceramics until my final year. I didn't study so much but I was able to soak up the atmosphere of Kyoto and meet lots of people. ... I came back to Sado not so much because I love Sado but because I had to. My ancestors have been here for 300 years using the Mumyoi clay. I live here in order to carry my family's history and to preserve and continue our *ie*. I am what I am because of my ancestors and this island. So I am like a road relay runner who inherits what he has to do and passes it on to the next runner when it is time. ... As you know, Sado is declining now. In my lifetime the population has halved and people are now talking about it dropping below 50,000. ... Yes, I agree with you that many people want to live in the countryside, and that would be a good thing in theory, but in reality they can't. They can't separate themselves from Tokyo. Centralization is good for growth and prosperity but the effect has been to open up a gap between Tokyo and the countryside. Tokyo is where everything is judged but that is not a good thing. It draws everyone into itself. ... But, the character of one's own region is important as the long accumulation of tradition, knowledge, technique, and so on brings forth new ideas. ... tradition should not be fixed. We should keep its basic elements and develop that. Fixing shape and technique prevents the artist from thinking and so we need to keep tradition flexible. ... One's own humanity is important too. Ingredients, place, history, people, essence are all mixed up and I can't easily explain what goes into [making pottery]. What I do is made up of a complex mixture of technique, brand, and blood. These are not new techniques [that I use] but just the first time to be employed using Mumyoi clay. ... happiness is not an individual thing. You cannot be happy without other people. You ask if I have achieved

self-realization. I don't know. If I had there would be nothing left for me to do and then I wouldn't be happy. There is always something more. I want to continue to make more beautiful pottery for now. ... You talk about bringing globalization to Sado. That is a good idea in theory and we are trying. But we lack the know-how to do it in practice.

The next interview extracts are from a younger female craft potter, and 'U-Turner', from the village of Kanai in central Sado.

I went to university in Kyoto and studied ceramic arts. I really loved it ... I worked really hard to improve my skills and knowledge. I know it may be difficult to appreciate, but there were times when I completely lost track of time as I was so absorbed [in my work]. Occasionally I even fell asleep while the wheel was turning! At times I lived in the university's pottery studio and slept there many nights. ... After I graduated I joined a kiln in Kyoto as an apprentice [*deshi*] and worked there for a couple of years and really enjoyed Kyoto life. But then my father came one day to Kyoto and he took me back to Sado. At first I was upset ... I felt that there was so much there that was lacking in Sado. We don't have a cinema here. Can you believe it? ... after a few years I grew to like it and now I want to stay here and develop our business. My father will retire one day and myself and my brother, he is studying pottery in Kyushu now, we want the business to continue. ... It was a valuable experience for me in Kyoto. I could experience living in a big city. Also, I could study away from home and really develop my work. I think if I had studied under my father we would have been fighting all the time, with him bossing me around and me refusing to obey him. Along with that, I could learn a lot of things that I could never have learnt [under my father] and I could develop my ideas and skills in new ways which I can now add to our business. ... Recently I was able to go to England to attend the wedding of a friend who was an English teacher here for a couple of years. Actually, she became interested in pottery while

here and I was able to introduce her to *Mumyoi-yaki*. I really loved the village atmosphere [in England], especially the pubs, and it inspired me to produce some new work. These are ceramic sculptures that express a kind of dream of my ideal place and they were inspired by my trip. ... It is very important for a potter to develop her own style so that when people see a pot they can say immediately, 'ah, that is one of [respondent's name]'s works.' We make lots of souvenirs here but so does everyone and people cannot easily tell the difference. So I am developing my own style ... you ask where that comes from. Well, I am not sure, but I think it comes from everything around me and what I have learnt and experienced. So, there is something of Sado and of Kyoto, my family and my university, my visit to England and so on in my work. It is impossible to say clearly.

The next interview extract comes from an interview with a middle-aged male craft potter who also made a 'U-Turn' to come back to Sado to be a potter.

When I was young I too found a job in Tokyo. ... What did I do? Well, I was a truck driver for 8 years. I came back to Sado when I was 29. But I returned here to be a potter to carry on the family business [*ie*]. I am the third generation. My grandfather made roof tiles but that became too difficult when mass produced tiles and concrete began to be used for construction. So he started making ceramic wares and now I am doing the same thing, making souvenirs as well as some artistic wares. ... We are trying lots of new things too. I want to bring the world to Sado to show them how we live. I recently showed in a craft exhibition in Frankfurt in Germany with some other craftspeople from Niigata. There was a metal worker from Sanjo and a lacquer-ware maker too. He is from Murakami. I am not sure if it was a good idea, but we are trying to turn globalization around somehow. My son is making a website but he is finding it hard. ... No, we do not cooperate very much with each other. Maybe we don't know how to cooperate. Each

family has its own way of doing things that has been developed over generations. That is a hard thing to undo. ... There are some things, however, that my son is involved in. There is a group of young ceramic artists, for example – my son is a member – and they are working together. But these are recent developments and I don't know if it is too late.

In the above three quotations we can see evidence for five different aspects of work and identity that the craft of pottery has the potential to develop within an individual. These are:

- A deep feeling of inter-generational connectedness within the family household, the role of the individual within that, and its contribution to one's personal identity and creativity.
- A deep feeling of rootedness in one's locale and of its potential in the creation of personal identity and creativity.
- A deep appreciation for combining custom, innovation and individuality to create something entirely new but that simultaneously is identifiable in terms of what previously exists.
- A deep appreciation for how creative work that is expressive of one's personal identity, experience and background can be immensely fulfilling for the individual.
- A potential to become deeply absorbed in the creative process and, thus, experience feelings of self-realization.

However, the quotations also show that the pottery industry in Sado is not without its problems and, as the last respondent hinted, it may be that current efforts to revitalize the industry, and Sado society in general, are a case of 'shutting the door after the horse has bolted'. First, in common with most industries that are based around inter-generational reproduction of the *ie*, the potters appear somewhat reluctant to share accumulated skills and knowledge. Viewed positively this shows a competitive spirit among such businesses. However, in terms of deploying the necessary resources to

stem the tide of life away from Sado, it may be somewhat self-defeating. For example, cooperation to produce a website among a group of businesses has been mooted on more than one occasion<sup>11</sup> and, to the disappointment of some, there are disagreements as to what shape such a move should take and how it should be done, such that the project has not yet been implemented.

## **Discussion**

Contemporary life in modern developed societies is becoming increasingly predicated upon the ability of individuals to achieve that most elusive of goals; a cohesive, contiguous, and personal narrative of self-construction and self-fulfilment, with work being a principal location for its attainment (Csikszentmihaly 1997; Giddens 1990 and 1991; Matanle 2003). The development of an individual identity, the prospect of overcoming personal challenges, and the opportunity to engage in self-expression are all integral to that quest. In addition, in recent years a great amount of empirical and theoretical research has been accumulating to show that, once people have reached a level of material prosperity commensurate with their daily requirements, they will move on to attempting to gratify other higher order needs (see for example, Inglehart 1990; Jurgenson 1978; Maslow 1987 [1954]; Yankelovich 1978). Chief among these are the intense feelings that come with the achievement in one's life and work of what has been called, among other things, self-realization (Hamada 1998), self-actualization (Maslow 1987 [1954]), or flow (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihaly (eds) 1988).

In this way, Karl Marx's humanism lay in his assertion that self-realization was humanity's chief social value; that true freedom and happiness for the individual are the outcome of controlling the process of creative production of one's identity in the material world. That, rather than being a curse to be borne grudgingly, the labour process and its creative consequences have the potential to become the primary means for the achievement of individual and societal self-realization (Marx 1973 [1857-58]).

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with the son of the previous respondent.

For Anthony Giddens (1990 and 1992) personal identity creation, with work as one of its primary locales, is at the heart of what it means to be modern and what modern people are striving to achieve for themselves.

Referring more closely to the empirical basis of this research, Randy Hodson (1996) produced some very compelling data to show that being engaged in crafts industries was the most satisfying form of employment available in a modern setting, and one which allowed workers the highest levels of personal dignity. Moreover, although Japanese culture possesses its own trajectory and peculiarities, in this respect there is no reason to believe that Japanese people, and the young people of Sado, are so different from those in other developed societies in their work orientations. Thus, Hamada (1998), Hamaguchi (1982), and Sugimura (1997) all argue that work provides some of the best opportunities for the creation of a personal narrative of self-development and self-realization. However, they also argue that, in the Japanese case especially, this narrative is impossible without the communal or relational dimension. Furthermore, Koseki (2001; 2002; 2005), himself a practicing industrial craftsman who writes on employment in craft industries in Japan, is very certain of the role of that work in the development of individual and community identity and fulfillment. Moeran (1984; 1997) and Yanagi (1972; 1985), both of whom studied at the pottery community of Onta in Kyushu with the latter being a friend and contemporary of Hamada Shoji and a founder of Japan's Mingei movement, have discussed at length the importance of folk crafts, and especially rural craft pottery, to personal identity development and the sustainability and special character of Japanese rural society and culture.

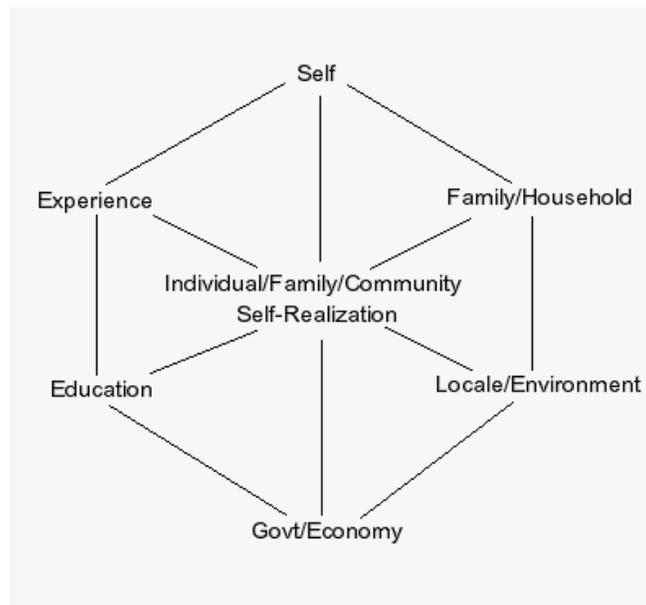
In terms of the roles of culture, environment, locale, and work in the re-development of rural areas in general, Ray (1998) describes how territorial identity and cultural markers are increasingly being used for instrumental as well as normative purposes, while Santagata (2002) shows how culture-based goods may be used for endogenous community-based economic growth. Rausch (2004, internet) in his research in Aomori Prefecture describes how the development of a local identity through the careful management of cultural markers and their media representation is important for the re-

vitalization of rural areas. Finally, Knight (2000) shows that, whereas the local environment was once exclusively regarded as a material resource to be exploited, it is now being re-commodified in some areas of Japan for environmental tourism and the regeneration of local areas.

As far as Sado Island is concerned, therefore, there appear to be abundant opportunities to re-market the island's rich heritage as a cultural and environmental destination. In this way the people of Sado Island may combine an appeal to the emerging trend in world tourism for experiencing culture and the natural environment with the achievement of dignity and fulfillment in their work in order to turn their dying communities around. Part of this objective might be done by the development of craft-based industries, with pottery as one of its central features, combined with a renewed respect for the integrity of the natural environment and each individual's identity and dignity. It is fairly clear that one of the keys to success in this endeavour is the education system. However, currently education also seems to be one of the greatest obstacles to re-vitalization, since its structures and institutions remain demonstrably unsuited to the circumstances and opportunities that presently exist in Sado, and perhaps elsewhere in Japan too. Nevertheless, this research supports the idea that such an approach, as elsewhere, appears to have the potential for contributing to stabilizing Sado's decline and revitalizing its society.

Thus, with the above empirical data and theoretical discussions in mind, figure 4 presents a schematic representation, or model, of the possible role of craft-based employment in rural Japan, whereby all components are mutually reinforcing to create the ideal conditions for individual, family, and community self-realization.

Figure 4: A Model for Craft-Based Work in Rural Society



### **Conclusion: Sado as the Quintessentially Postmodern Society**

This research started by outlining the decline of Sado Island's population through a statistical examination of its current educational and employment circumstances. Using extensive quotations from interviews with some of the island's residents, and using pottery as a case study in the deployment of an organic cultural marker in independent rural employment, the article proceeded to outline the complex and inter-woven relationships between individuals, households, the local community, and craft-based work in Sado society. I then proceeded to set the research into the context of theories of work and identity in modern society. The discussion ended with some suggestions regarding possible opportunities open to the people of Sado for the stabilization and revitalization of their society; opportunities which it seems the various local authorities as well as local residents are already beginning to explore.

Rather than taking the conventional approach and appreciating Sado Island as a relic of the past, Sado may have the potential for being the quintessential postmodern society, and an example for all of our futures. In this sense, there may be two routes available into the future for Japanese rural society. One is the continuation of its surrender to the dictates of the centre; in other words a capitulation to the

demands of an ecologically unsustainable and resolutely modern model of capitalism. The other is to transcend, or even overcome, capitalism and modernity, and for society to revitalize itself as an independent, self-sustaining, and sustainable post-modern community. This article has shown that either scenario is still possible for Sado Island's society. It is hoped that the latter outcome will eventually transpire and, in so doing, Sado's experience may make a small contribution towards both the stabilization of Japan's looming population crisis and the emergence of sustainable human society worldwide.

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