Peace through Reconciliation: Bridging the Intergenerational Divide on Teshima

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Context

Teshima is an island located in the Seto Inland Sea with a population of approximately 1,000 people. Since 2010, Teshima has been known as an “art island” because of the Setouchi Art Triennale, an art festival that draws 150,000 visitors annually. Due to the exponential increase in visitors to the island, tourism has become Teshima’s primary industry. The impacts of tourism have divided the younger and older generations of the community, complicating the governance and future of the island. Much of the island's younger generation run businesses supported by tourism, so they celebrate the expanding contemporary art scene. However, as tourism thrives, the local industries—agriculture, aquaculture, fishery and stonework—suffer. The older generation who manage the local industries harbor growing concerns regarding the long-term consequences of the Triennale on the ecosystem and economy of the island.

Before becoming an “art island,” Teshima was the largest site of illegal industrial waste dumping in Japan. For more than 40 years, the islanders fought a gruelling battle against the corporations responsible for the ecological disaster while simultaneously pushing the ineffective prefectural government to pass regulations to rectify the situation. But due to the toxic water and soil, the health of islanders worsened and local industries suffered. Eventually, the community won its battle in court, regaining autonomy over the island's governance and ecosystem. Soon after, the waste was relocated from Teshima to another island for waste treatment. This process is still ongoing.

Recounting their experiences, the veterans of the battle over Teshima’s ecosystem revealed that the issue was not only about waste dumping but also about how the island was governed. Older islanders now reflect upon the importance of being united in a self-governing system. Many of them believe that unity helped them win against the ecological disaster. Their concern is that tourism, controlled and influenced by outside forces, is not socially and financially sustainable for the survival of the sacred places and traditions of Teshima as well as the growth of its community. With the increasing rift between generations, the need for islanders to unite has become important once again.

Teshima’s history consists of stories in which the community overcomes adversity. While these memories are being overshadowed by the booming growth of the Triennale and art tourism, it’s the remaining living memories of the leaders that hold the key to understanding the problems with the new industry. In order to determine action for the future, islanders across generations need to reflect on their history to keep the memory of the community alive.

Background

We visited Teshima as a part of a Human Ecology Lab Island Odyssey (HELIO) program organized by College of the Atlantic in June 2019. For our fieldwork we engaged actively with the local people and the environment. We hiked long stretches around the island to learn about its ecosystem and visited the attractions for the Triennale including the Teshima Art Museum. By working for different islanders, we also learned about both the traditional and new industries such as stone workers, restaurateurs, and salt harvesters. In this process we came across various points of views on the issues facing Teshima. Currently, the divide between generations inhibits islanders from creating a clear and unified vision for the peaceful future of their island. Older islanders maintain strong opposition toward tourists and the art on the island. The younger generations struggle to connect with them as they don’t recognize these sentiments of their elders.

Ishii San, native to the island and a community leader, guided us to an informal museum in a tiny building near the site of the waste dumping. The space held countless documents illustrating the 40 years of activism by the islanders. A large banner with a long list of names of the individuals who fought this battle hung on the wall with red ribbons next to the names of those who had passed away. The number of ribbons were increasing, reflecting the fear Ishii San had during his time as an activist that his generation would be the last one in Teshima. Encountering these documents and ribbons helped us as outsiders better understand Teshima’s history and why Ishii San’s fear was still relevant. Although Ishii San had been at the frontlines in the fight against industrial waste dumping and generously shared countless stories about his home and its history, there are many more stories amongst the islanders. He will be our primary contact on the island.

Project Description

Reconciling the different generations, contradictory perspectives, and the outside forces that influence the divide is crucial in breaking the cycle of forgetting the past and repeating conflicts. Islanders must enact peace in the future of Teshima through reconciliation themselves, but we can create the
conditions for this action by working to keep the memory of islanders alive and create more spaces for conversation. To do this, we will return to Teshima to document oral histories of islanders from across various industries, creating an archive that reflects the intimate lives and experiences of Teshima islanders. The questions that will guide our interview process are intended to plant seeds of reflection and reconciliatory effort: How do you want Teshima to be remembered? How does your history impact your future on Teshima? What can art mean in the future for the community living on Teshima?

Since the island is so small, there are no local newspapers or media outlets; this makes the archival work all the more important. There are few formal materials and spaces to learn about the history of the island, and cultural history survives through the stories islanders tell. Kimoto Sensei has told us: “Archive as a practice has been valued in the area of studying peace, war, and disasters. For example, archive works great as a practice to record things that don’t fit to be written down or things that are hard to be picked up from written texts.” We will design a website that can act as a virtual archive and is accessible to everyone by linking it to Teshima’s website which islanders use to organize commerce and other activities. The virtual archive will integrate the oral histories that we film and edit with pre-existing materials about the island’s history of illegal industrial waste dumping. Because the art festival is one of the reasons why the island is divided, we won’t be collaborating with artists who are considered outsiders. Every week, we will host dinners for old and young islanders to socialize, bringing different generations and ourselves (who are outsiders) to the same table. Through regular interactions, we will be able to contextualize our interview process for islanders by getting to know our project as we simultaneously get input from them to help design the website. This is the stepping stone that will help us build trust with the islanders and help them become more comfortable in sharing their personal lives with us on camera.

The Teshima Welcoming Center is the first building anyone sees when leaving or entering the island via ferries. This is also the place where islanders access transportation to get around the island. The Usaginingen Theatre is run by island residents and houses audio visual events. Islanders can set up shop in both of these spaces to sell their handmade products to theater visitor. The Welcoming Center and Usaginingen Theatre provide spaces where we will be able to set up a booth to engage in conversations about our project, and host dinners in a neutral space where the different generations of Teshima and the tourists can connect.

We’re aware that our initiative will not solve the island’s problems, but we can help islanders realize how they can bridge the intergenerational divide. We want islanders to consider how the effects of tourism and the art industry have perpetuated a divide amongst them. How we build the virtual archive will depend on what the islanders tell us. We might find that they have a lot more in common than they think. If it turns out that they don’t, either way collecting this information can prompt a divided community to have the important conversations that they have been unable to have. By capturing the island’s turbulent history, we will help islanders track how the rifts between generations developed over time. Furthermore, the virtual archive will help tourists make more informed decisions about how to engage responsibly with the island, its economy, and its fragile ecosystem.

Implementation

The project will take place between July and August 2020. Kimoto Sensei, co-facilitator of the HELIO program, helped us connect with Ishii San when we first visited Teshima. He will support our project by connecting us to community leaders. Kimoto Sensei has been working closely with people on Teshima for more than 20 years, and he has a sensitive understanding of the complicated issues there. He will guide us in the time leading up to the implementation period and during the project via email. Given his position as an outsider who has built a strong relationship with Teshima and its community, Kimoto Sensei’s mentorship will be critical in making responsible and respectful choices as we socialize with islanders, interview them, and document what we find. Koichi Kimoto, professor of geography and coordinator of Center for Hand-on Learning Programs at Kwansei Gakuin University, will also help to connect us with people to interview and will guide us with logistical support during the project implementation. Ishii San will be our primary contact on the island.

Team

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