

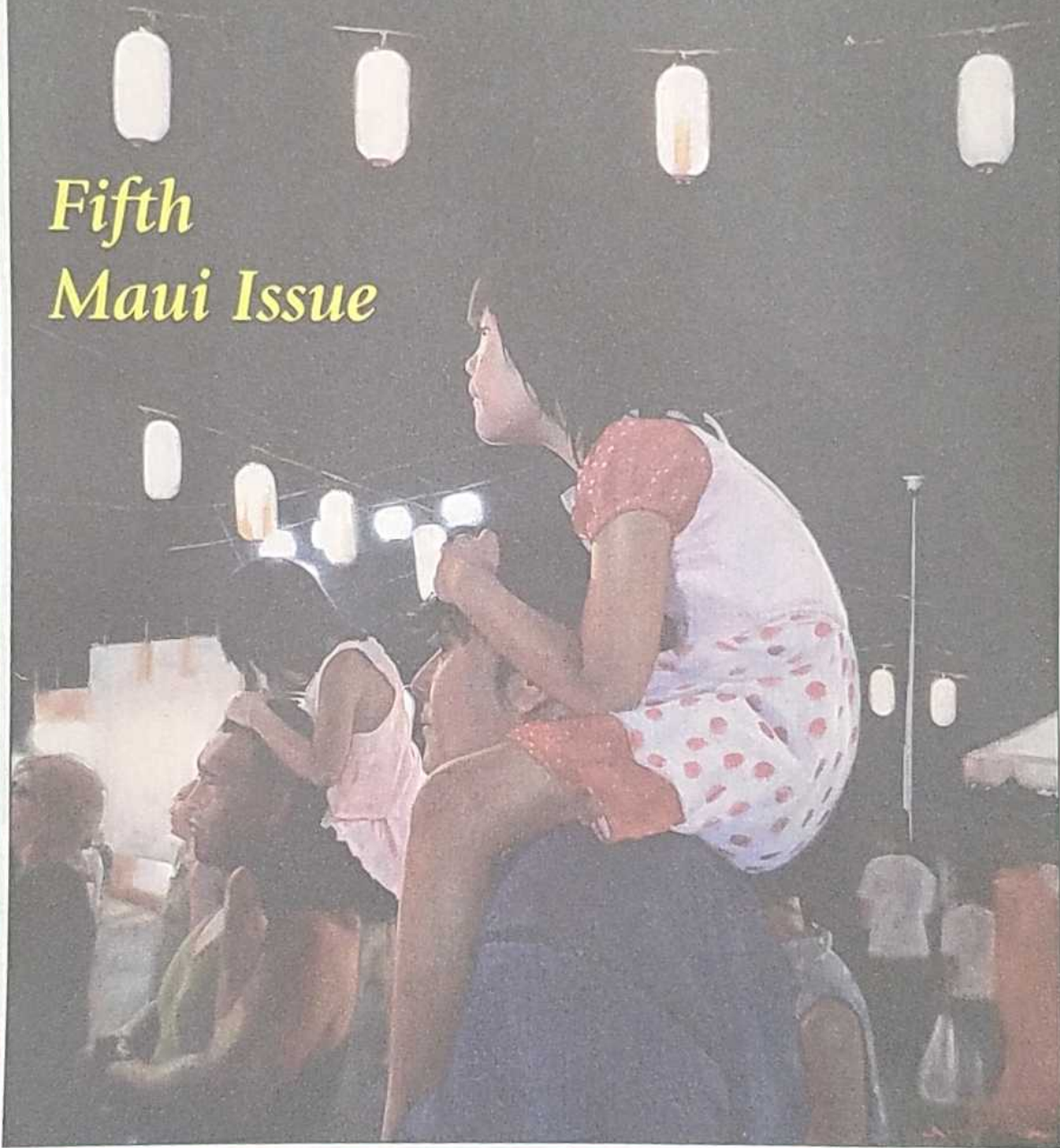
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THE ARTS

# FUKUSHIMA . . . HAWAI'I

Japanese Photographer Connects Fukushima with Hawai'i Through Her Love of Bon Dance

**Kristen Nemoto Jay**  
*Special to The Hawai'i Herald*

From now through Aug. 17, Japanese photographer Ai Iwane's photo exhibits — "Island in My Mind, Fukushima" and "Fukushima Ondo" — are on display at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center's Schaefer International Gallery.

The Tokyo-born Iwane is known for her ability to inspire viewers by observing and documenting niche communities from around the world. Her work has been featured in such magazines as *GQ Japan*, *Rolling Stone Japan* and *Forbes Japan*.

Iwane's inspiration for "Island in My Mind, Fukushima" and "Fukushima Ondo" began with her visits to Maui and Fukushima from 2011 through 2017. It connects the two parts of the world through ancestry, similarities in culture and remembrance. During her visits, Iwane developed a fascination with Hawai'i's bon dance festivals, which she attended for the first time in 2006. In the summer of 2011, Iwane attended Lahaina Jodo Mission's bon dance.

"Hawai'i bon dances are much larger and more

festive than the ones in Japan," she said. "[They're] not only summer festivals like it is in Japan nowadays, but also to especially honor the ancestors, who sacrificed a lot through the wartime. [After my 2006 visit] I would come every summer to Hawai'i for bon dances."

After attending many bon dances for six years, she found herself especially drawn to Lahaina Jodo Mission's festival after seeing the temple featured in the film, "Great Grandfather's Drum," a documentary on Japanese Americans in Hawai'i told through the story of Maui Taiko and its founders, Kay Fukumoto's family.

"[Maui Taiko] was performing to the popular bon dance song, 'Fukushima Ondo,' at Lahaina Jodo Mission," she recalled. "After doing some research, I found out that the song was taught by people (immigrants) from Fukushima who moved to Maui over 100 years ago. They first performed it at Keāhua village in Pā'ia, Maui."

In the aftermath of the horrific earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster that had devastated Fukushima and the neighboring prefectures on March 11, 2011 — just months before her visit to Hawai'i — Iwane was determined to learn more about the origins of "Fukushima Ondo," how it became popular and its connection to the Hawai'i people whose ancestral roots were in Fukushima.

Upon arriving at Lahaina Jodo Mission's bon dance, she was thrilled to see 30 high school students from Fukushima in attendance. They had come to Maui through the Aloha Initiative Project, a program that provided homestays for Japanese youngsters who lost their homes and, in some cases, family members, during the March

11 disaster. The Maui community had raised funds so that the Fukushima students could spend a few days on the Valley Isle getting some needed rest, recuperation time and recreation. Their itinerary included participation in Lahaina Jodo Mission's bon dance.



Ai Iwane working with the Kodak Cirkut camera in Fukushima. (Photo by Haruo Imazumi)

Iwane was moved by the aloha spirit that Maui's people extended to the students. When the familiar bon dance song "Fukushima Ondo" started to play with its mixture of high-pitched flutes and the fast-paced cadence of taiko drums, everyone, including the shy Fukushima visitors, got up and danced.

"They were really surprised to hear the song," Iwane said. "That's what got me inspired to connect Hawai'i and Fukushima to each other."

During that same trip, Iwane met the Rev. Gen-cho Hara, resident minister of Lahaina Jodo Mission, who in turn introduced her to Rick Shimomura, owner of Nagamine Photo Studio in Wailuku. During the course of talking with Shimomura, she learned that the studio owned a rare 1930s Kodak Cirkut, which is a large-format, 360-degree rotating panoramic camera. Shimomura's maternal grandfather, Harold Nagamine Sr., the studio's founder, used the camera to document the funeral services of the Japanese at Lahaina Jodo Mission by taking panoramic group shots. Shimomura said his grandfather took the photos himself.

Shimomura offered to loan the camera to Iwane for her next photography project, if she could get it working again and find film for it. Despite the obstacles, Iwane was ecstatic — she had never used a camera like it before.

Iwane took the camera back to Japan, where she found three camera repairmen who were willing to work on it. It took them two years to get the Kodak Cirkut back in working order.

While the camera was being repaired in Japan, Iwane helped arrange for Maui Taiko to travel to Japan and perform throughout Fukushima. Maui Taiko founder Kay Fukumoto led 12 members on a tour of the prefecture, performing for various taiko organizations in Fukushima. The response from



Photographer Ai Iwane with Florence Shimomura and her son, Rick, at the Nagamine Photo Studio. Rick Shimomura loaned Iwane the Kodak Cirkut camera that his late grandfather used to shoot Japanese funerals. (Photo by Kay Fukumoto)

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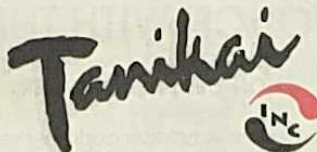
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Ai Iwane's photograph of a Futaba district in Fukushima, taken in 2014 with the Kodak Cirkut camera. (Photos courtesy Ai Iwane)



And a second photograph of that same spot two years later, in 2016, that shows some improvement.

the Fukushima people was overwhelming. They were happy to see with their own eyes Hawai'i's appreciation for "Fukushima Ondo," which had originated in their prefecture during the bon dance season.

As Iwane toured Fukushima, she met many locals from the town of Miharu. They had lost their homes and businesses during the catastrophic events. She stayed in touch with some of them and when the Kodak Cirkut was operational again, she continued to document their lives.

"I've been to the evacuation sites before while working for a magazine job and I felt like I couldn't really tell anything with the picture I was taking," Iwane said. "But with the [Kodak Cirkut] camera and my connections to people who survived the aftermath, I thought I could do something with the film that I couldn't do with [regular] photography."

This Maui exhibit is extra special to Iwane because it takes the visitor inside the lives of those who were affected by the tri-disaster. It also incorporates her interest in Hawai'i's bon dances, the generosity of the Maui people who opened their homes and hearts to the sad and stressed-out Fukushima residents, and the role Rick Shimomura and his camera and Kay Fukumoto and her Maui Taiko members played in creating the exhibits.

It was through these chance meetings that Iwane was able to contact and bring to life the stories of the Fukushima survivors whose lives were forever changed that day in 2011. The entire exhibit was shot in black and white film with the Kodak Cirkut, capturing the survivors' homes or businesses in the aftermath of the disaster.

"I want people to try to understand what they went through," said Iwane. "Even the picture

doesn't do much justice to how much some of them have lost."

In her interviews with her subjects, all of them spoke of driving to their new home in Miharu when, suddenly, tears would begin streaming down their faces. All of them experienced that grief. Family businesses that had existed for generations were swept away in minutes. Some of the people were tied to the land for over a thousand years. Even if their land was contaminated, they told Iwane they would rather die with their land because it had been their life.

"The panoramic photo tries to capture what they would have seen every day when they go home or go to work," Iwane continued. "And now this is what they have left to see. I think we can help them in a way by understanding and sympathizing what they've had to overcome."

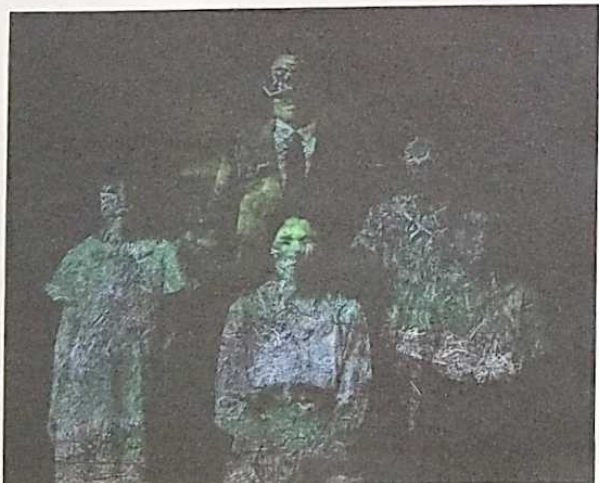
Iwane's "Fukushima Ondo" exhibit is a collection of portraits of the people and families who taught the song, "Fukushima Ondo," to the Pā'ia community. With the help of Rodney Chin, former director of farming operations for the now-defunct Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar, Iwane was able to pinpoint the location where the Fukushima immigrant families once lived. Once the location was established, Chin and Iwane projected the images of the people on a projector against a backdrop that was available in the area.

As nightfall began to envelope the skies over Maui, Iwane took a photo of the family photos projected

against tall, grassy nooks that were once home to the "Fukushima Ondo" teachers. Iwane said this was an important part to her exhibit, albeit quite haunting, because it further connects the past with Hawai'i and its Fukushima descendants.

"I wanted to connect Hawai'i and Fukushima with the song," said Iwane. "The song connected me to Fukushima from Hawai'i, so I wanted to pay tribute to those who brought the song to Hawai'i and maybe have the audience understand that we're all connected in some way. It's been over a hundred years or so and they're still playing the same song during Hawai'i's bon dances. It has been taught through each generation. I hope I can help keep the story and our connections alive with my work." ■

*Kristen Nemoto Jay was born and raised in Waimānalo. She recently left her job as editor for Morris Media Network's Where Hawaii to pursue a freelance writing career. She also tutors part-time at her alma mater, Kūi-lua High School, and is a yoga instructor at CorePower Yoga. Kristen earned her bachelor's degree in sociology from Chapman University and her master's in journalism from DePaul University.*



In her companion exhibit at the MACC, Ai Iwane pays tribute to the Issei from Fukushima who taught "Fukushima Ondo" to their neighbors in Keāhua village in Pā'ia. In the above photo, Ai Iwane projected a family photo of Shosuke Nihei from Kailua Camp onto current landscape from the area.

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