

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 88):

Broome, A Requiem Journey

15 September 2022

Japanese people and those who have studied Japanese history will know that August is a requiem month, when we pray for the repose of the spirits of the dead. Following on from my recent trip to Thursday Island, last week I made a visit to Broome. This was the first visit by a Japanese Ambassador in 6 years – since 2016. This is my report from that trip.

1. Broome's location in Western Australia

Broome is a small seaside town in the northern part of Western Australia (WA), overlooking the Indian Ocean and Timor Sea. WA is a vast state – around 7 times larger than Japan, and making up around a third of the area of Australia. Even from the state capital, Perth, a flight to Broome still takes approximately 2.5 hours.

Just a stone's throw from Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, Broome's climate is sub-tropical. Although August is part of the dry season, the daytime temperature still reaches above 30 degrees, hence the area is bustling with travellers from places like Perth, Melbourne and Sydney hoping to escape the winter. The town's population is a mere 20,000, but during peak tourist season it can apparently rise to around 60-70,000.



I found the vivid contrast between the white sands of Cable Beach, the deep red of the Australian earth and the turquoise blue of the Indian Ocean quite spectacular. As someone who has seen many times the islands of the Caribbean and the Pacific, I can say beyond doubt that Broome's scenery is first class. One difficulty, however, is that there are very few hotels and it can be hard to reserve a room, most of which are fairly expensive.



The red earth, deep blue of the Indian Ocean, and white sands of Cable Beach

2. The pearls linking Japan and Australia

Similar to what I described in [News From Under the Southern Cross \(Edition 86\): Distant Thursday Island](#), the factor that has led Broome to play an important role in the Japan-Australia relationship is its connection to the pearling industry. From the late-19th Century until the Second World War, Japanese pearl divers came not only to Thursday Island, but also to Broome, Darwin and other key cities in northern Australia to dive for pearls.

One reason why the Japanese Government opened its first consulate in Australia in Townsville in 1896 was due to the active flow of Japanese people related to the pearling industry.



Diving suit worn by pearl divers (at the Broome Historical Museum)

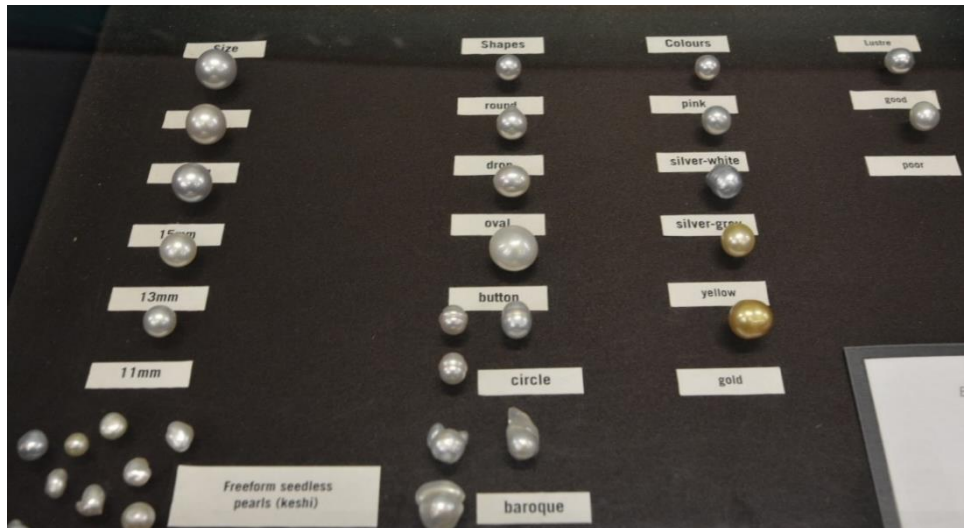
A cultural festival begun in 1970 by Japanese settlers – the Shinju Matsuri – has also been taken up by the wider Broome community. I have heard it is developing into the town's most important cultural and tourism event. I am also delighted to hear that it has kept its Japanese name – translated as 'Festival of the Pearl'.



Source: Shinju Matsuri website

Broome's main street is lined with shops selling jewellery and other luxury items made from pearls. I worried about the consequences of letting my wife go off alone, as she excitedly entered the fashionable boutiques as if pulled by an

invisible force, so I kept a close eye on her. However, I too found myself drawn in by the many pearls of shapes and sizes not seen in Japan, and the necklaces, bracelets, and even cufflinks bearing such original designs. I felt the depth and power of Broome's long pearling tradition.



The wide variety of pearls found in Broome (at the Broome Historical Museum)

3. Links with Taiji

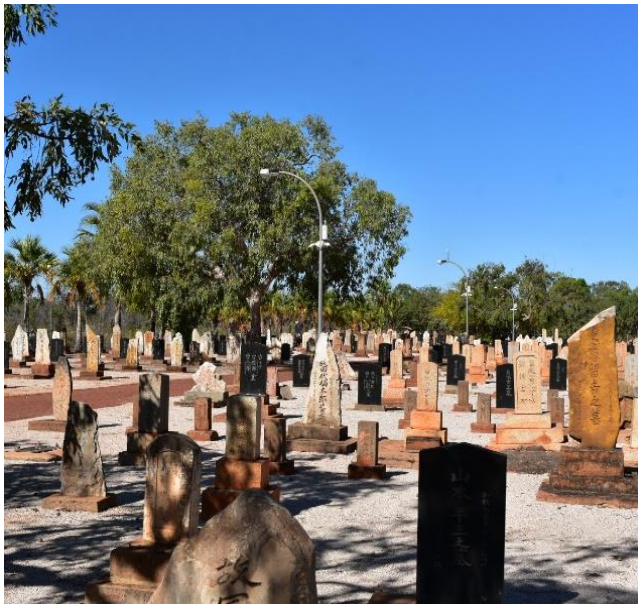
One valuable discovery was that many of the Japanese pearl divers were born in the town of Taiji in Wakayama Prefecture. This contrast with Thursday Island – where many pearl divers came from the towns of Arita and Kushimoto in the same Wakayama Prefecture – piqued my interest.

Actually, I have a particular attachment to Taiji. Four years ago, when I was Director-General of the Economic Affairs Bureau in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whaling was a particularly big issue. I made a visit to Taiji, one of the origins of the whaling industry – a six-hour trip from Tokyo. I learned about how whaling has shaped local history and culture, and I was also fortunate enough to have the opportunity to hold a deep discussion with the Mayor of Taiji and other key people.

The link with Broome comes from the sister-city relationship between these two towns. I find it heart-warming that this relationship is being sustained over the generations through an exchange program in which Taiji middle school students have been travelling to and learning about Broome, and students from Broome's Saint Mary's College travelling to Taiji on an almost yearly basis since 2007.

4. The Japanese Cemetery

Dangers such as decompression sickness were commonplace for pearl divers. In one corner of the cemetery managed by the Shire of Broome Council is the Japanese Cemetery, with headstones marking where around 1,000 Japanese pearl divers are interred. Standing beside these is a memorial cenotaph devoted to the victims of the 1908 cyclone (said to be over 200 people).



The largest Japanese Cemetery in Australia



The Memorial

The majority of the headstones were erected many years ago. However, I was relieved to see that, thanks to financial support from organisations such as the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Perth and the Japan Shipbuilding Industry Foundation which has been used to repair these headstones, the cemetery as a whole is in good condition.

It saddened me to hear from a local resident that many of these headstones were knocked down when anti-whaling sentiments were at their peak. Such sentiment has declined lately, and security measures have been put in place, therefore it seems there is no longer any need to worry. I prayed for peace for those resting beneath the headstones.

5. The Broome Air Raid

Broome is also a town which bears the scars of the Pacific War. The Bombing of Darwin and midget submarine attacks on Sydney Harbour by the Imperial Japanese Military are often talked about, however Broome was also impacted by

disastrous air raids.

At the time, Broome was home to an air base, and was seen as an escape route for Allied Forces retreating from the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). Records in the Broome Historical Museum show that there were four air raids on Broome, the first of which was in March 1942. According to a museum staff member, these were professional attacks designed to hit only military targets yet despite this, tragically around 100 people were killed.

At the same time, the start of conflict between Japan and Australia dramatically changed the lives of Japanese pearl divers. Every Japanese person was forcibly detained in internment camps in southeast Australia, far from their homes. I also heard that some Indigenous women in Broome who married Japanese pearl divers were suspected of being spies and followed their husbands into internment camps, taking their young children with them.

Upon their release from the internment camps, most of these Japanese people were sent back to Japan. In some cases, however, such as marriage to a local, they were allowed to stay in Australia. Following the end of the war, in 1953 Japanese pearl divers were allowed back into the country.



Lunch with members of the Japanese community in Broome

In light of this tumultuous history, it was incredibly valuable to enjoy lunch and casual discussion with Shire of Broome Councillor Philip MATSUMOTO, and Akira MASUDA and Tsunehiro TANAKA, who came to Broome as pearl divers after the war.

6. The power of reconciliation

The Japan-Australia relationship is now said to be better than ever. However, when I came to Broome, I reflected again with silent awe that it was the suffering, hard work and devotion of those on the front line – such as the pearl divers – that shaped this mutual trust which is now the bedrock of our bilateral relationship.

As with every one of my trips, I kept in mind opportunities for public relations. Hence I agreed to an interview with ABC Radio Kimberley (you can listen to it [here](#)). During the interview, I found myself referring to the Japanese divers as ‘unsung heroes’, and citing post-war relations between Japan and Australia as a good example of reconciliation. I believe this was something I could say only because I had come to Broome and witnessed their legacy with my own eyes.



My interview at ABC Radio Kimberley

7. Our evolving relationship

While in Broome, I had the opportunity to visit facilities used by INPEX - the Japanese company which has invested in developing and cultivating onshore and offshore gas fields in Australia, including the world's largest foreign direct investment project by a Japanese company, the Ichthys Project.

Broome is an important base for their operations. We were met by staff members including INPEX Senior Vice-President (Corporate) Mr MURAYAMA, who guided us around a facility owned by helicopter operator PHI, which aids with activities such as the transportation of workers to and from offshore gas fields. We were able to understand in detail not only how they operate some of the world's largest helicopters (seating up to 16 people), but also how they conduct emergency and disaster relief in the case of accident and illness, keeping staff on standby 24 hours a day.

With this flawless plan in place, there have so far been no serious accidents. What is more, I was encouraged by the fact that they have saved the lives of local staff members countless times. I understood that this cooperative relationship, just like that of the pearl divers so many years ago, has been passed down over decades and across industry lines.



With representatives from INPEX and PHI

8. A final word

As I paid my respects – my heart full of sympathy – at the Japanese Cemetery, I was approached by one of the members of the Japanese community who had generously shown us around. She asked me, “Ambassador, do you know which way the headstones are facing?”

Of course, if I thought about it, I noticed the headstones were all facing the same direction, like sunflowers yearning for the summer sun. Upon seeing my puzzled look, she replied in a kind yet firm voice.

“Japan. They are facing Japan.”



Under that piercing blue, cloudless sky, with the fierce sunshine and a gentle breeze on our faces, I could not find the words to reply.

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