

A Dying Japanese Village Brought Back To Life — By Scarecrows

In Japan, you sometimes hear the term "village on the edge." What it means is "village on the edge of extinction."

Japan's population is declining. And the signs of that are easiest to see in rural areas, like the mountainous interior of the southern island of Shikoku. For example, the village of Nagoro used to have around 300 residents. Now it has 30.

Visitors know they've arrived when they see the three farmers in floppy hats resting against a telephone pole by the side of the road. They're always there. They're scarecrows, life-sized figures made of cloth and stuffed with cotton and newspapers.

The same goes for the man fishing in the creek a bit farther up the road, and the woman working in the potato field and the people waiting at the bus stop.



All of these figures are the work of 67-year-old Tsukimi Ayano. She's been making them for more than a decade.

Three scarecrows lean against a telephone poll at the edge of the Japanese village Nagoro. Tsukimi Ayano created these figures after she returned to the village to take care of her father. The area now includes many of her figures and has attracted tourism. *Ina Jaffe/NPR*

The first one was intended to just be a *kakashi*, a scarecrow, something to keep the birds from eating the seeds she'd planted.

She made it look like her father. Why not?

He didn't mind, she says. "But all the neighbors thought because the scarecrow was wearing his clothes and looked like him, that he was out farming very early in the morning," she says. "They would sometimes say, 'Good morning, you're up working very early.' It just started up a conversation between the scarecrow and the neighbors."

Ayano sometimes cooks over a wood fire in front of her small house. Nearby is a concrete tank where she raises fish she catches in the river.

Country life seems to suit her. You wouldn't guess she lived most of her life in Osaka, Japan's third-largest city. Her family moved there from Nagoro when she was in seventh grade. And she remained. Married. Raised children.

She says she always made stuff. Little figures, dolls. There wasn't much room in her apartment in Osaka.

She returned to her village 15 years ago to look after her father. The changes around her were profound.

"When I was in seventh grade, there were lots of people in the community, a lot of villagers, a lot of children," she recalls. "When I came back, you could obviously see the decline in the population."

But that emptiness has given Ayano a huge canvas for her creations. She guesses she's made more than 400 scarecrows by now.

Many are replacements. The figures don't last all that long. But all of them have individuality in their faces and clothing. Some have the names of characters she's made up. Others are based on real people — some living, some gone.



There's Mrs. Miyako Ogata, an old woman sitting in front of an abandoned house. "She's a grandmother who passed away two years ago," says Ayano. "But she used to sit like that in front of the house, so I made the figure exactly like her."

She says seeing the figure doesn't make her sad. At least not anymore — "because she's wearing the same clothes as when she was very active. I come around and greet her all the time. So it feels like she's still here."

Ayano seems to take the loss of her neighbors in stride. At 67, she's one of the younger people in the village.

The school down the road from her house is now closed. There are no children in the village anymore.

Instead, the school has become a showcase for dozens of Ayano's figures. She's made the classrooms as she remembers them: full of students, teachers and parents looking on.



The child figures represent the last two students who were there before the school was closed. The school is now open to show Ayano's work. *Ina Jaffe/NPR*

One classroom has just two child figures seated at the desks. They represent the last two students who were there before the school shut down for good four years ago.

"These two little scarecrows, the children made those themselves during their home economics class," she says. "And then they put the clothes they wore back then on the

figures before they left the school."

Ayano's scarecrows have put this village on the map. The regional government sponsors a Scarecrow Festival for tourists each October. And some foreign visitors just find Ayano on their own. So she was unfazed when a young tourist from Poland named Kit Kornowalski showed up unannounced in early July.

He says his urge to meet Ayano wasn't a rational thing. "I just really wanted to come." And the scene didn't disappoint. "It is absolutely wonderful. I can't stop smiling."

That's not the reaction that some Western observers have had. Ayano's creations have been described as "creepy" and "haunting."

But her figures are cheerfully embraced by the locals. You can see her work not only in Nagoro, but also in other villages in these mountains. In one of them, a cafe owner proudly displays a scarecrow in her window. She calls it "cute."

Ayano rejects many assumptions about her work, both positive and negative. She says she doesn't make these scarecrows because she's lonely. She doesn't think of them as "a project." She doesn't think of them as art.

Making them just brings her joy.

"Every morning, I just greet them," says Ayano. "I say 'good morning' or 'have a nice day!' I never get a response, but that doesn't make a difference. I go around talking to them anyway."

She says she'll keep making these figures as long as she's able. So Nagoro's population of scarecrows is likely to increase, as the people who live here slowly fade away.