RCYC LUMINARA · HONG KONG TO TOKYO
FEATURED GUEST LECTURE

Sugar Power

When Samurai Came for the Sugar

A Companion Guide to the Presentation Slides

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Executive Brief

This morning you were on Amami Ōshima. You walked through silk workshops where artisans dip thread into iron-rich mud, pull it out, and dip it again — a process that takes months to produce a single bolt of fabric. Some of you visited a distillery where shōchū is made from brown sugar, the only place in Japan where that is legally permitted. A beautiful island. Quiet. UNESCO World Heritage forest in the mountains. The kind of place where you think: nothing much happened here.

Something very big happened here. For two hundred and fifty years, Amami was a sugar colony — Japan's first. The people who lived here were forbidden from growing rice. They were forced to grow sugar cane instead, and every gram of it was shipped north to Kagoshima, where it was converted into something far more dangerous than sweetener. It was converted into cannon. Into spinning mills. Into the financial engine that would overthrow a government that had ruled Japan for two and a half centuries.

This lecture tells the story of how that happened. It begins in 1609, when three thousand Satsuma samurai invaded the Ryukyu Kingdom and cut it in half — leaving the southern islands, centred on Naha, as a diplomatic front that kept the China trade running, while seizing the northern islands for direct exploitation. Amami was the largest of those northern islands. Within a generation, Satsuma had banned rice cultivation there, forced every household into sugar cane production, and built a closed loop in which farmers could not eat without buying the domain's rice and could not earn without selling the domain's sugar. A colonial plantation economy two and a half centuries before Japan officially had colonies.

Sugar revenues transformed Satsuma. By the 1840s, the domain was one of the two wealthiest in Japan, and Lord Shimazu Nariakira poured that cash into the Shūseikan — Japan's first modern industrial factory complex — built from Dutch technical manuals on the bayside at Kagoshima. Reverberatory furnaces for casting iron cannon. Spinning mills. A glassworks that produced the Satsuma kiriko cut glass you will see tomorrow. Every bit of it financed by sugar from Amami.

The lecture closes with the moment the investment paid off. In January 1868, at a crossroads outside Kyoto called Toba-Fushimi, Satsuma-led forces met the shogun's army and broke it. Within weeks the Tokugawa government — which had administered Japan since 1603 — simply ceased to exist. The centre fell because the periphery could afford to fight. And the periphery could afford to fight because of an island you walked through this morning.

Tomorrow in Kagoshima, you dock at the place where the money went. That is Talk Four's prelude — though we will hold the Kagoshima story itself for the sailing-day lecture on Day 8, when we can take our time with it.

About This Guide

This companion document accompanies the PDF slides from Dr Christopher Gerteis's guest lecture, delivered on Day 6 of the Luminara voyage after returning from Amami Ōshima. It is designed to be read alongside the slides, providing the narrative and context that a live audience would hear during the presentation. Dr Gerteis is Associate Professor in Modern and Contemporary Japanese History at SOAS University of London. You can email him anytime at cg24@soas.ac.uk. All inquiries are welcome.

Slide-by-Slide Companion

Slide 1 — Title

The lecture title appears over a photograph of Amami kurozatō — the black sugar that built an empire. The subtitle, When Samurai Came for the Sugar, signals the arc of the talk: a kingdom invaded, a colony forged, a domain enriched, and eventually a revolution financed. The QR code in the corner links to Dr Gerteis's website.

Slide 2 — Ryukyu: The Dual Subordination & Trade, c. 1700

A custom map showing the commercial system around 1700. Green arrows mark the Ryukyuan tribute route to China — from Naha up the coast to Fujian and on to Beijing. Blue lines show the northbound flow into Satsuma at Kagoshima. The gold arrows in the middle trace what actually happened to the cargo: silk, sugar, indigo, and deerskins redirected straight into the Japanese market. The locked chain at the centre of the map is the point.

This is a commercial machine disguised as a diplomatic relationship. Every arrow represents money moving, and the fuel that kept the whole operation running was sugar.

Slide 3 — A Maritime Bridge

Left panel: a Ryukyu tribute-ship painting from the Kyoto University Museum. Right: three cards labelled SHURI, CHINA TRADE, and JAPAN TRADE, with a Qing investiture seal below, in Chinese and Manchu, granting authority to the King of Ryukyu to rule. The point is that Ryukyu's value came from a problem its neighbours could not solve. Ming China had banned private maritime commerce. The Tokugawa shogunate restricted foreign trade to a handful of ports. But China wanted Japanese silver and copper, and Japan wanted Chinese silk, porcelain, and medicines. Ryukyu sat in between. A tributary of China in form, an informal dependency of Satsuma in fact, the kingdom carried Chinese goods north and Japanese goods south through a system that both empires tolerated because neither had to acknowledge it.

Slide 4 — The Island You Walked This Morning

A full-bleed image of Amami — likely the mud-dye pits, or the harbour as seen from shore. The text over the image is spare: the island you walked this morning has a hidden history written in sugar. This is the lecture's opening scene. The guests have just spent the day on Amami; the images are fresh, the silk and shōchū are still in memory. The lecture asks them to look at the same island through a different lens — not the UNESCO-listed forest or the artisan workshops, but the coastal lowlands where, for two and a half centuries, sugar cane was grown under the threat of the sword.

Slide 5 — The Central Question

A text-only slide. Blue background, white letters, no image. The question: How did the remote southern domain of Satsuma become the most dangerous power in Japan — and what paid for it? Japan under the Tokugawa shoguns was the most stable political order in East Asia. It lasted two hundred and sixty-five years. Edo was the capital; Osaka was the commercial centre. When the system collapsed in the 1860s, it did not fall to a rebellion at the centre. It fell to a domain at the far southern tip of the country. The rest of the lecture answers why.

Slide 6 — 1609: Three Thousand Samurai

A dark slide with 1609 set in large gold type over a period illustration of samurai on campaign. Four translucent cards lay out the invasion of Ryukyu: THE INVASION — Shimazu Iehisa, lord of Satsuma, sends three thousand battle-hardened samurai, veterans of Sekigahara, to annex the kingdom by force. THE MASK — Satsuma hides its control from China, preserving Ryukyu's nominal independence to keep the tribute trade channel open. THE BACKDOOR — prohibited Chinese silk, medicine, and books now enter Japan through

what becomes known as the Satsuma Gate, bypassing Tokugawa restrictions. THE SPLIT — the southern islands retain nominal autonomy; the northern islands, including Amami, are seized for direct exploitation. The cleverness of the operation is the split: Ryukyu does not disappear, because Satsuma needs it to exist.

Slide 7 — The Islands Divided

A map showing the geographic division: Naha and Shuri in the south, Amami Ōshima and its neighbours in the north. Two cards on the right frame the split. The southern islands keep their tributary relationship with China — the diplomatic mask that keeps silk and porcelain flowing through Satsuma's backdoor. The northern islands — Amami Ōshima, Tokunoshima, Kikaijima — are severed from the kingdom and placed under direct Satsuma administration. No diplomatic pretence. No king's authority. Just domain officials, domain law, and domain quotas. The climate there is subtropical, wet, warm — perfect for sugar cane. Satsuma proper, around Kagoshima, has volcanic-ash soil that grows rice poorly. Amami grows sugar brilliantly. The division is not administrative. It is agricultural.

Slide 8 — Part Two: The Sugar Colony

A section divider. The left panel is RCYC blue and carries the heading; the right panel shows a map of the historical spread of sugar cane cultivation across East Asia, tracing the two ancestral species — Saccharum sinense from the China coast and Saccharum officinarum from the islands of maritime Southeast Asia — that met in the Ryukyu archipelago and crossed. The divider marks the turn from setup to mechanism. The first part explained how Ryukyu was split and why; the second explains what extraction looked like on the ground.

Slide 9 — Where the Money Went

A data slide with three large stat callouts over an off-white background. £500M — the Shimazu clan's debt to Osaka merchants before sugar revenues arrived, with annual debt service running up to 100 per cent of income. 100% — the share of Amami sugar controlled by the Satsuma state monopoly. #2 — Satsuma's rank among the wealthiest domains in Japan by the 1840s, behind only Kaga. The numbers describe a financial turnaround without parallel in early-modern Japan. Most daimyō domains were trapped in a cycle of loans and interest payments. Satsuma broke the cycle by running a captive plantation economy two hundred miles off its southern coast. The revenues were enormous, and they were largely invisible to the Tokugawa centre.

Slide 10 — Produce Sugar or Starve

A dark slide with four numbered gold steps laid over a historical image of sugar production. The chain of argument runs: MONOCULTURE — rice cultivation banned on Amami; peasants forced into sugar cane production; food imported from Satsuma at domain-set prices. MONOPOLY — sugar became state currency; private sales punishable by death; every

gram shipped to Kagoshima under armed escort. SURVEILLANCE — sugar magistrates, satō bugyō, posted permanently to the islands to enforce quotas; nearly one-third of Amami's population were yanchu, hereditary bonded labourers. THE LOCK — by controlling both the food supply and the only legal market for sugar, Satsuma created a closed loop. You could not eat without buying the domain's rice. You could not earn without selling the domain's sugar. It was, in every meaningful sense, a plantation colony — two and a half centuries before the word 'colony' entered Japanese political vocabulary. The kokutō shōchū that guests may have tasted this morning is made from the same brown sugar. Only Amami distilleries are legally permitted to make it — a quiet recognition that these islands have a unique relationship with sugar, whatever else the recognition was meant to mean.

Slide 11 — Sugar Money Became Cannon Iron

The mask-drop slide. Against a background of the Shūseikan reverberatory furnace ruins at Sengan-en in Kagoshima, four cards lay out what Lord Shimazu Nariakira built in the 1840s with the sugar revenues. REVERBERATORY FURNACE — Western-style smelting for casting iron cannon, built from Dutch technical manuals translated into Japanese. CANNON FOUNDRIES — Satsuma producing its own artillery, achieving regional military parity with European naval powers. SPINNING MILLS — Western cotton-spinning machinery imported and replicated, the first mechanised textile production in Japan. SATSUMA GLASS — the kiriko cut glass developed as an experiment in Western industrial techniques, which guests can watch being made tomorrow. The point of the slide is that no other domain could do this. Several tried. What Satsuma had, and what the others lacked, was an independent revenue stream — a colonial plantation economy generating cash outside the Tokugawa system. Sugar money became cannon iron. And those cannon were about to be tested.

Slide 12 — January 1868

A dark slide with the date in large gold type and a punchline in gold italic below. The image is from Tsukioka Yoshitoshi's Chronicle of the Imperial Restoration, 1876, from the Met Museum's open access collection. At Toba-Fushimi, outside Kyoto, Satsuma and Chōshū forces met the army of the Tokugawa shogun. The shogunate had more men. The Satsuma-Chōshū alliance had better weapons — modern rifles, field artillery, tactical training from British and French advisors — and soldiers who had already fought a modern navy and survived. The battle lasted four days. Within weeks the Tokugawa government, which had administered Japan since 1603, ceased to exist. The emperor, a teenager named Meiji, was installed at the head of a new government dominated by men from Satsuma and Chōshū. The centre fell because the periphery could afford to fight. And the periphery could afford to fight because of sugar.

Slide 13 — The Island Behind Us

A full-bleed photograph of Amami Ōshima from the water — the view as the ship departed this afternoon. A dark overlay carries the closing text: you came ashore on an island that once paid for a revolution in sugar; what you tasted today is what Amami kept for itself. The lecture does not end on a conclusion. It ends on the image of the island receding into the sea, and on the recognition that the silk and the shōchū the guests experienced today are the fragments that survived a system which, for two and a half centuries, treated this place as a factory.

Slide 14 — Closing

The lecture title returns, now without the kurozatō photograph. The speaker's name and affiliation, and a QR code linking to Dr Gerteis's website. The slide remains on screen during any questions from the audience.

About the Lecturer

Dr Christopher Gerteis is Associate Professor in Modern and Contemporary Japanese History at SOAS University of London. His books include *Gender Struggles* (Harvard University Press, 2010) and *Mobilizing Japanese Youth* (Cornell University Press, 2021). He is General Editor of the six-volume Bloomsbury *Cultural History of East Asia* (forthcoming in 2027-28) and director of the *Simulating Silence* digital heritage project. His research examines how institutions produce the categories through which societies are governed — from postwar Japan to the sugar colonies of the East China Sea. You can read more about Chris at https://christophergerteis.net