

## Rural Settings as Cultural Resources: Environmental Tourism Practices in Miyama Town, Japan

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### Introduction: Tourism resources

In line with worldwide environmental awareness, the popularity of natural environments as tourism resources has risen. In tourism practices, resources are considered to be any attractions providing the motives for journeys. Fennell (1999: 68) claims that there are developed and undeveloped resources for tourism practices; developed resources ‘facilitate the use of a given area,’ such as highways, buildings and sewerage, and undeveloped ones, including natural environments, ‘may be found both in urban and wilderness environments but the degree to which they are recognised as such is individual dependent and perhaps situation dependent.’

Concerning natural environments as tourism resources, Clawson and Knetsch (1966, cited in Hall and Page 1999: 94) state that ‘[t]here is nothing in physical landscape or features of any particular piece of land or body of water that makes it a recreation resource; it is the combination of the natural qualities and the ability and desire of man to use them that makes a resource out of what might otherwise be a more or less meaningless combination of rocks, soil and trees.’ In addition, Kreutzwiser (1989, cited in Hall and Page 1999: 93-94) claims that tourism resources are an ‘element of the natural and man-modified environment which provides an opportunity to satisfy recreational wants.’

These statements indicate that nature as a tourism resource is created by tourists appreciating and enjoying some specific combinations of natural and cultural elements. In other words, tourism resources consisting of natural environments are developed by the interaction between human beings and the environment, and are composed of man-made objects. In fact, several Japanese anthropologists (e.g. Uchibori 2007 and Yamashita ed. 2007) who contributed to a five-year Anthropology of Resources project argue that nature can be considered as a cultural resource when human beings utilise it for both sacred and profane activities.

In this presentation, I focus on rural environments in order to clarify the understanding that natural environments function as cultural resources in tourism practices. First I will introduce

the satoyama landscape which has become one of the most popular tourist attractions these days and then I will explain the utilisation of this satoyama for tourism. After that, I will introduce a case study of Miyama Town, Japan, to strengthen the understanding that nature functions as a cultural resource in the context of tourism practices.

### **Satoyama: rural settings determined by environmental discussion**

In Japan, there is a common type of rural landscape called “satoyama” which is now classified as an environmentally friendly tourist attraction. The understanding of what this term satoyama indicates has changed depending on historical conditions as well as on human appreciation. The term satoyama once meant the area surrounding villages or family properties where firewood, thatch and wild mushrooms could be collected (e.g. Arioka 2004). In other words, satoyama indicated the area located between agricultural land and forests and the villagers went there to obtain necessities without staying overnight.

However, after the Second World War, urbanisation developed quickly everywhere in Japan and much of the land formerly described as satoyama was redeveloped for residential or industrial use thus eradicating the buffer zone between villages and the wilderness. As a result, environmentalists and ecologists arranged symposiums and workshops in order to promote the conservation of satoyama. Through this promotion, it was emphasised that satoyama was a part of rural settings and that these settings should be conserved as well.

Since the late 1980s, the word satoyama has frequently appeared in the media with the new meaning. Articles in the Asahi Newspaper in the early 1990s reveal that the development of golf courses nationwide was accelerated by destroying rural settings near urban areas and the word satoyama was continually used to indicate these threatened places. In this context, satoyama came to signify endangered valuable natural areas adjacent to cities.

In the late 1990s, during the planning stage for Expo 2005 which was held in Aichi in central Japan, one of the proposed sites was considered to be satoyama and environmental protestors carried out a campaign against the development of this site. They claimed that the operating body had neglected the environmental conservation of this satoyama and the word satoyama in this context was defined as a valuable, accessible, co-existing form of nature available for the benefit of human beings. These environmental protests succeeded in attracting a great deal of public attention and in the end Expo 2005 was held without destroying this site.

Through the succession of environmental discussions about satoyama, this term has come to refer to almost every element of rural settings, including mountains, forests, residential space, wooden houses, paddy fields and rivers. For example, Fukamachi Katsue and others (2001: 704) define it as the “social and ecological network of the village and its surroundings,

which include agricultural lands, open forest [clearings] and forests.”

To sum up, the meaning of satoyama has shifted from a narrow space around villages to all elements of rural settings. This shift resulted from both the environmental change and the environmental discussions in Japan. In other words, satoyama has been recognised as environmentally valuable by the public and the understanding of satoyama has been (re) created in line with both ecological and social changes.

### **Rural settings as Cultural Properties in Japan**

When satoyama is utilised for tourism practices, the nomination as a cultural property has clear impact on its profile and increasing its popularity. Concerning the registration system of cultural properties in Japan, the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties is recognised as internationally unique because one single law covers and protects both cultural and natural properties.

In relation to rural settings, originally the law had only one suitable category for them, i.e. Places of Scenic Beauty. This category includes gardens, bridges, gorges, coastal areas and mountains and a potential area for this category is assessed to determine whether it possesses a high artistic or aesthetic value for Japan (The Agency for Cultural Affairs 2008: 40). In this category, gardens and bridges are considered to be cultural places and the other places of scenic beauty, such as coastal areas and mountains are recognised as natural ones. A nomination in this category, especially those of natural places, is given to protect beautiful sites as ideal and genuine forms of nature, in other words, the most essential point of this category is that the selected natural environments remain intact.

Before the 1990s the Agency for Cultural Affairs seemed to avoid discussing the criteria for selecting cultivated land since it has always been in a state of perpetual modification and therefore it was difficult to judge its genuine or original form. However, since the early 1990s, when nationwide environmental discussions about the conservation of satoyama flourished, rural environments such as paddy fields and forests have been considered as potential areas for Places of Scenic Beauty.

In addition, Cultural Landscapes was included in Japanese law in 2002, ten years after recognition by the World Heritage Committee in 1992, as a more appropriate category for rural environments. Internationally, the World Heritage Committee attempted to create a new category for the combination of cultural and natural sites and in 1992 “cultural landscapes” were introduced. In this context, cultural landscapes are cultural properties and represent the “combined works of nature and of man” and “they are illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and

cultural forces, both external and internal.”

In Japan, this Cultural Landscapes category overlaps Places of Scenic Beauty yet the artistic or aesthetic scenery constructed by human-nature interaction, namely rural settings, is usually categorised as Cultural Landscapes (see Bunkacho Bunkazai-bu Kinenbutsu-ka 2005). In addition, if one place is selected as a Cultural Landscape in Japan, it can be easily decided whether it would meet the criteria for recognition as a World Heritage site. Indeed, these days the Japanese rural landscape as a distinctive form of nature is recognised as a potential national and international property.

In contrast to these two categories for natural environments, since the middle of the 1970s the Agency for Cultural Affairs has been involved with rural conservation by considering rural settings as being cultural and by creating another category, Preservation Districts for Groups of Historic Structures. This was introduced in 1975 in order to protect not only a group of historic structures such as old buildings, temples or traditional houses but also the whole area, in other words, cities, towns and villages, where those structures exist. This category, as opposed to Places of Scenic Beauty, was developed in order to conserve not only artificial objects but also their surroundings including natural settings.

Originally, prior to the national government action, several local authorities enacted bylaws of streetscape or townscape conservation. These authorities aimed to protect their local landscapes including the groups of traditional buildings as well as natural settings around these artificial structures. The Agency examined both these bylaws and foreign systems concerning townscape conservation and then created the unique and appropriate category for Japan, i.e. Preservation Districts for Groups of Historic Structures (see Ito 2000). In this Preservation Districts category, the groups of buildings or artificial objects are registered as cultural properties and the areas surrounding them are approved as conservation areas.

In addition, when the Agency established this category, it intentionally set up a number of financial support systems, for example, if an area is registered as a Preservation District, the local community can receive national and regional government grants through the local authority in order to protect and sustain its historic structures. Furthermore, “support is also given through preferential tax treatment” (The Agency for Cultural Affairs 2008: 42), meaning that the local residents receive a tax reduction on their properties including houses and land. In addition, the local governments of these selected areas become eligible to apply for other national government funding. Thus, it can be seen that this category is useful for rural development in terms of financial support.

Accordingly, rural environments such as satoyama are eligible for classification as several types of properties each of which have advantages and disadvantages. Places of Scenic Beauty and Cultural Landscapes are the categories in which the national government protects beautiful scenery by giving it ideal and genuine status, whereas the category of Preservation

Districts for Groups of Historic Structures attempts to conserve whole areas including man-made and organic features.

In relation to tourism, if particular rural settings are nominated as cultural properties, not only the rural settings but also the neighbouring areas attract a great number of tourists and so the local people can take the opportunity to develop new commercial ventures. The case study of Kita village, Miyama, will clarify these effects.

### **A case study of Kita village, Miyama: A brief introduction**

Miyama Town is located 56 kilometres north of Kyoto City and 50 kilometres south of the Sea of Japan in the middle of the Tanba highlands which consist of mountains 600-800 metres high and their valleys. The total area of Miyama Town is 340 square kilometres, 96 percent of which consists of mountains and forests, while the remaining four percent consists of farmland, rivers, and living space for the local residents. The valleys in Miyama were formed by the stream of the Yura River and its tributaries, along which most residential areas are located. The Yura flows westwards from the east end of the town until it finally reaches Tango-Yura, on the shores of the Sea of Japan.

Kita village is located at the eastern part of Miyama, and in 1993 it was selected as an Important Preservation District for Groups of Historic Structures owing to its recognition as an outstanding mountain village. Since then, Kita has become the most popular tourist attraction in Miyama receiving more than 230,000 visitors annually. Kita was approved as an Important Preservation District not only because of a group of traditional houses with thatched roofs, but also because the surrounding views were typical of the scenery described in old Japanese folk tales. In fact, the vista of this village consists of the river, agricultural land, wooden houses with thatched roofs, forests and mountains, and as a result, it is interpreted as a typical example of satoyama.

There are about 40 households in Kita, whose residences are located along the Yura River. The residents used to generate income by working in forestry and agriculture but in the late 20th century these industries became unprofitable. The village also became such an aging community that, like other aging villages, it was often described as “the village where no baby cries.” In Kita, as a result of these circumstances, on the one hand old houses were not replaced by new ones and, on the other, alternative commercial activities were needed to increase the existing villagers’ income and to encourage young people to move into the village as new immigrants. Accordingly, from the middle of the 1980s the residents started to consider tourism development by using their living environment as the inspiration for a new local revitalising activity.

Since the 1970s both the Agency for Cultural Affairs and Kyoto Prefecture had considered

Miyama as a potential area for Preservation Districts for Groups of Historic Structures. In 1989, these authorities gave methodological and financial support to the Miyama government's in-depth research into assessing future nomination. However, in 1984 Kita villagers had already started their own discussion about ways of sustaining the village, especially its outstanding scenery of cultivated land and thatched houses. As a result of this discussion, for example, a cooperative for thatched roof maintenance was created.

Then in 1989 when the government research commenced, the residents arranged their own bimonthly workshops to learn about the system and about examples of Preservation Districts in order to judge the feasibility and eligibility of their own application. Furthermore, after the authority published its report, the residents held a meeting to review it and they conferred with Miyama Town government about the conservation of Kita village and the application for nomination as an Important Preservation District.

After 1993 when Kita village was selected as the 36th preservation district, several tourist facilities, such as restaurants, souvenir shops, car parks and toilets, were built. These facilities have been owned and managed by the company run by the local community and have achieved 63 million yen sales annually. Most residents consider their local tourism development positively. Specifically, 82 percent of them claimed that jobs and income had increased owing to tourism and 79 percent of them considered that the village was now able to offer several new jobs to young people. In addition, 70 percent stated that the change in the village gave them great expectations for the future (Hozonchiku 10-shunen kinen gyoji jikkai 2003).

Simultaneously, however, most residents worried about the dramatic change of their village into a major tourist site. In fact, more than three quarters of the residents expressed a preference for tourist numbers to remain stable or even decrease. The residents continue to discuss ways of managing tourism and surviving within the village. In fact, the majority opinion is that the most important consideration is not visitors but the residents themselves, so the residents do not meet all the tourist demands preferring to give priority to their own satisfaction with their everyday lives in Kita. In addition, most residents agree with the idea that the more the residents enjoy their own life in Kita, the more tourists will want to visit to appreciate them as well as their village.

### **Major Tourism Practice in Kita**

There are several types of tourism practices in Kita of which one of the most common is a one-day coach tour arranged by several nationwide tour agencies. Most coaches stop at Kita village for about 45 minutes, and so passengers can look around the village and purchase some



**Figure 1: Kita village (Photo: Megumi Doshita)**

local vegetables during this break. Independent travel is also popular with individual tourists arriving by private car or motorbike to look around the village in their own time. Concerning the number of tourists, after Kita's selection as a conservation area, it increased dramatically from 50,000 in 1993 to 235,000 in 2003.

According to the results of my original interviews conducted with approximately 70 tourists in 2003-2004, a main motive for their visit was that they had seen a TV programme or had heard news about Kita and they wanted to check the facts for themselves. Another major purpose is that visitors come to see the traditional houses with thatched roofs. Some tourists come to appreciate the beautiful scenery and of these some enjoy only natural features whereas others are interested in a variety of rural settings. In addition, 60 percent of the respondents used to live in the countryside and they had come to Kita village to remind themselves of their former lives in rural areas.

However, most respondents had little interest in contributing to the conservation of rural settings in Kita and Miyama though most of them regarded environmental protection in Kita and Miyama as important. In fact, about 40 percent of interviewees thought there was nothing they could do themselves to conserve the rural settings in Kita and Miyama although 16 percent of all interviewees were motivated to donate small sums of money to the village itself. There was one respondent who insisted that the conservation of Kita is a task only for local residents not visitors.

The manager of a guesthouse in Kita comments on this situation saying that villagers once enjoyed communicating with visitors in depth. However, currently they cannot find time to communicate with tourists, as on the one hand visitors explore Kita for less than one hour,

and on the other hand, Kita villagers are too busy to cope with so many tourists. This manager is disappointed with a situation in which they can neither select their guests nor share their thoughts about Kita village with them. Another resident also states that although it is not necessary for Kita to become a popular tour site it is important for the villagers to consider how they offer their hospitality to visitors.

It seems that Kita villagers struggle to manage tourism practices and build a relationship with tourists.

### **Thatching experience tour in Kita**

Concerning the interaction between local residents and visitors, there is a noteworthy tour programme held in Kita: i.e. a thatching experience tour arranged by thatchers. There is no official national certificate or training programme for thatchers in Japan yet customarily a person who was trained for ten years under a professional thatcher's instruction can obtain most permits for thatching and house construction. In Miyama, by the 1990s, the number of thatchers had plummeted to three owing to the decrease in the number of houses with thatched roofs. In addition, all three thatchers were about to retire, so Miyama Town and some local construction companies recruited young people from outside the town and trained them as thatchers. As a result, several young thatchers are in business now and one, here called Aoki, came to lead the thatching experience tour programme.

Aoki had graduated from a university in Kobe City in the Kansai urban area, where he gained awareness of environmental issues after taking some modules in environmental studies. After graduating, he came to Miyama to join the thatcher training programme as his dream was to become an architect with the skill of thatching. His main motive as the tour leader is to offer the tour participants the opportunity to think about thatching and sustainable development and in particular their connection with environmental issues. In fact, Aoki himself rarely tries to fit into the local community and almost never thinks about any matter from its point of view. For example, he criticises various activities related to local revitalisation in Miyama for wasting both the local budget and human resources. In Miyama, it is unlikely anyone will welcome a person who is so disrespectful of the local community.

Despite the fact that Aoki's attitude is not appreciated in Miyama, he was able to promote thatching experience tour because a senior apprentice, named Inoue for convenience, supported Aoki's plan and let the tour participants try out thatching genuine traditional roofs for themselves. During the tour, Inoue in his role of head thatcher supervised the other young thatchers while also teaching the tourists how to thatch the roofs.

Inoue is a person of Miyama origin and grew up in Kita village. He once went to the Kansai urban area to become a musician but returned to his home town and started to train as a



**Figure 2: Thatching experience tour programme (Photo: Megumi Doshita)**

thatcher. Inoue observed the process of revitalisation in Kita and has been inspired by several local residents who have led the tourism development. Inoue said that he always thinks about Kita village and its future whenever he works as a thatcher. In other words, for Inoue, and probably most people of Miyama origin, Kita village and the community is the primary concern, and environmental issues or the sustainability of traditional techniques like thatching is the second.

However, partly owing to the tour leader, Aoki, most participants preferred discussing environmental matters or the architectural value of thatched roofs to obtaining information and knowledge of Kita village or Miyama. The main interest of many participants, most of whom were art students or trainee architects, was thatched roofs, traditional architecture or environmental tourism. In fact, the reasons why these participants joined this programme were: an interest in traditional houses or houses with thatched roofs as a type of architecture; curiosity about traditional architecture and education; their affection for thatchers; and an interest in comparing Kita with other ecotourism or rural tourism destinations. In addition, one participant claimed that he joined this tour because he happened to have some free time. In contrast, no participant showed his/her interest specifically in Kita village, Miyama, or the management of the local community.

Accordingly, the examination of the thatching experience tour reveals that there are explicit gaps between the people of Miyama origin, some immigrant thatchers and most tour participants in terms of tourism practices and the understanding of Kita village.

## Discussion

In this presentation, I explained three related topics in order to clarify the appropriateness of recognising rural settings as cultural resources in the context of tourism. These are: the historic change of the term satoyama, the nomination system for cultural properties focusing on rural environments, and my own case study of Kita village, Miyama. According to these topics, tourism resources consisting of natural environments are developed by the interaction between human beings and the environment and the argument for conserving satoyama is undoubtedly exemplified this point. In Japan, the meaning of satoyama has altered in line with social and ecological change and now indicates whole rural settings. In addition, satoyama has become more highly valued through nomination as several types of cultural property and is recognised as a type of exquisite tourist attraction. From these explanations it can be seen that the rural settings which stakeholders utilise for tourism are abstract objects created from both the real environment and a series of environmental discussions.

The case study of Kita village, Miyama, shows that local residents can revitalise their societies by using rural settings even after struggled with depopulation and the deep recession affecting agriculture and forestry. However, this case study also reveals that the utilisation of these resources entails several different understandings of the tour site and that various stakeholders pursue their own goals and benefits through tourism. In consequence, when rural settings are recognised as cultural resources, it can be seen that the utilisation of natural environments causes not environmental but social conflicts between stakeholders. Therefore, in the future discussion of environmental tourism practices it is important to consider rural settings as being cultural. Tourism studies approached from this point of view will provide some useful framework of cultural resources.

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