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Myanmar Traditional Farming in Comparison with Satoyama Landscape in Japan

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ABSTRACTS

Keywords: Traditional farming systems; soil and water conservation; Satoyama, Kyaytay-ywar, natural resources

1. Introduction

Myanmar is a South-east Asian country with total land area of 676,577 Km², the second largest country in SEA after Indonesia. The estimated population in 2011 is 59.78 million, consisting of diverse ethnic groups speaking over 100 languages and dialects. Myanmar is an agro-based country traditionally with a wide range of climatic condition and diverse agro-ecosystems, favoring the domestication of numerous crop species. It has long been renowned as endowed with rich natural resources, biodiversity, and particularly a high percentage of forest cover remaining with species richness and endemics. The 69.3% of population are living in rural area, engaging in agriculture, livestock, fisheries, forestry activities which highly rely on the natural resources. However, degrading environment and depleting natural resources have been occurring in Myanmar since several decades ago. The reasons are inter-related issues, such as population pressure, over exploitation of timber, agriculture encroachment into forest areas and etc. In 1990, Myanmar's dense forest covered more than 45% of the country's area. By 2010, it was reduced by more than half, to ~20%. The forests still remain a vital source of rural energy and maintaining livelihoods in terms of food, construction materials and other basic resources.

Myanmar land-use systems show many similarities with Satoyama landscape in Japan. Farming has been dependent on resources from the forests surrounding farm village, namely, "Kyaytay-ywar" which means "village which has a forest nearby" (Literally, "Kyaytay" means "Forest" and "Ywar" means "village"). The forests provide major resources such as, timber, wood and charcoal fuel, animal feeds, and edible food such as honey, medicinal plants, bamboo shoots, and mushrooms etc. There are similarities as well as differences when comparisons are made to landscapes in Myanmar, especially in mountainous and hilly regions of Chin, Kachin and Shan States where the most ethnic nationals are residing.

2. Methodology

A field study visit was conducted for 10 days (15th – 24th July, 2013) at Sasari village, Nantan city, Kyoto prefecture. The population in Sasari is 17 with 10 households, of which 5 households are living alone. Each household was visited and we talked with them. Their family, the way of life of previous and present, difficulties and problems, concepts and perceptions on Satoyama, etc. were focused in the interviews. During our visit, four scholars from Sherubtse College, Butan were also doing a field study research at Sasari village for one month. We enjoyed together the "Okagura" Summer Festival (Mask dance and music) at Taunta village, met and discussed with the community to understand the culture and traditional way of living in rural area. Then we had a get-together party with Sasari village people at the Community Hall. Myanmar, Butanese, and Japanese food were served. We achieved not only study but also friendship and sincerity from the village people. A brief development plan of the area was explained by an official from Miyamacho Office Branch, and Mr. Kono, a Deputy Head of the Chi Development Association explained the Satoyama image and their activities. The Association and local government have numerous plans to rejuvenate and revitalize village like Sasari. They are implementing the programs of "Satoyama conservation movement" with the help of volunteers (e.g., Work Camp).

3. Results and discussion

The field study gave us the opportunity to discover the area as well as its culture and its traditions. The way of life, the people we met and the conditions of life are quite different from what we knew and our experiences in Kyoto, Tokyo and Osaka cities. Surrounded by mountains, the Sasari village is showing its traditional look with its old streets and traditional houses (many with *Kayabuki*, traditional

thatch roofing). These scenic views often take us back to the old Japan. It was easy to understand at a glance that the problem of depopulation has been very severe. Only the aged people, mostly above 65 years, retired and living on pension, are left. They all are kind, humble and hardworking, and all said they are very much worried about the disappearance of their village. Sasari village is a symbol of the Japanese rural society which is suffering the severe "depopulation and aging" problem. Closed Elementary and Junior High Schools, discarded ski resort and abandoned paddy fields make a sightseer a very unhappy feeling. These remind all of us of the golden days of Sasari village 30 years back.

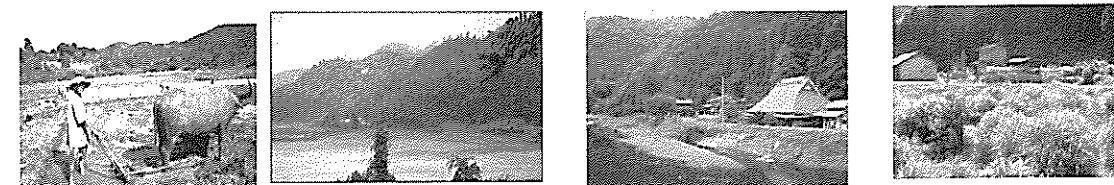
Satoyama is a Japanese term for traditional rural production landscapes. These can be characterized as a mosaic of different ecosystem types—secondary forests, farmlands, irrigation ponds, and grasslands—along with human settlements, which have been managed to produce bundles of ecosystem services for human well-being. Satoyama landscapes have been rapidly declining. The consequences are - wild animals (deer, boars, monkeys) damage to crops, abandon of land, labour shortage, and etc. If no intervention or revitalizing program is initiated, there is a high risk of village disappearing in the future.

Like Satoyama landscape in Japan, Myanmar "Taw-ywar" landscape has decreased significantly mainly due to the deforestation, construction of large dams, extension for settlement and agriculture. Myanmar traditional use of forest lands such as, coppicing for charcoal production, and use of non-timber forest products (NTFP) resembles the situation in Japan of 30 years ago. Farming has been based on a combination of animal husbandry—with cattle, sheep, and goats—and cereal production. Cattle are used for power for land preparation in farming and transport. Making hay by mowing the meadows has never been practiced. The crop residues are commonly used for animal feed. Small-scale subsistence farming of the swidden (so-called slash-and-burn) technique are still practicing in mountainous areas of Myanmar. Myanmar has no aging problem since the working population of aged 15-60 years is 58.3% in 2011. However, the population growth rate (average annual %, 2010- 2015) is 0.8 while that of urban and rural is much different, 2.5 and - 0.1%, respectively. Moreover, under the poor economy and low job opportunities for about a half century there are increasing migrant labors outside the country. It was noted that about 4 millions people are working in foreign countries, like Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Japan, etc.

4. Conclusion

The Satoyama landscape in Japan and the Myanmar "Kyaytay ywar" landscape are both the result of traditional farming and land-use for centuries. Growing populations, urbanization, and industrialized agriculture have already changed the Satoyama landscape of Japan. Myanmar also can foresee a possible trend of disappearing "Kyaytay ywar" landscape in near future. Currently, Myanmar is at an historic stage in its development under the new democratic government, and ongoing economic and political reforms promise to deliver wide-ranging social and economic benefits and create many opportunities for domestic and foreign investors. Under this situation, strenuous efforts are being made to upgrade the all-round development of the country. We should be careful that when the economic developments are pursued to produce the short-term benefits to human well-being, simultaneously it often degrades the ecosystems necessary to sustain for the long-term benefits.

The essence of landscapes such as Satoyama and "Kyaytay-ywar" is that coexistence of human society and the natural environment is achieved through sustainable management of various ecosystems. Learning from this essence of the traditional human and nature relationships, we should focus on establishing new governance mechanisms that can manage and conserve these landscapes in a sustainable manner. Preserving and managing Satoyama should be in focus for nature conservation all over the world. Japan has given us lessons to be learned!



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