

Ethnographic Research on the “Koya” Traditional Warehouse in the Village of Shitaru, Tsushima Island

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1. Research Background

Like many other remote areas in Japan, the island of Tsushima is suffering from the depopulation worsened by the ageing issue; in consequence many villages and their related culture and knowledge of the local environment are on the edge of extinction. The “*Mitsukeru Ikasu Tsunagu*” (MIT) association is one of the organizations invested in the Island Revitalization; they based their activities in the village of Shitaru. The wooden construction warehouses at Tsushima have unique architectural features compared to the rest of Japan. The architectural landscape, including the groups of warehouses in every village, results from the specific position of Tsushima as being on the edge of the country and therefore in permanent cultural and commercial relation with Korea and China until the recent social disruption.

2. Research Purpose and Methodology

The main purpose of this research is to study about the warehouses at Tsushima with a socio-cultural anthropological understanding to assess the values of the traditional lifestyle, as it remains until the after war period in the 1950s, in order to present its potentialities for the revitalization of the island, currently facing depopulation and ageing issues; the combination of the cultural legacy with modern knowledge for its future’s sake. The field survey held for this research is based on the ethnographic methodology, semi structured interviews were held with the villagers of Shitaru and the various stakeholders involved into the Island Revitalization program, architectural drawings of the village and some warehouses were done in order to understand the spatial organization principles and rules.

3. Findings and Conclusion

The warehouses involved shipyard carpentry skills from ancient times. Because it fits the best the local climate and it fulfills its role of dehumidifier to store food and clothes, the warehouse remained as a raised floor style wooden construction. The spiritual aspect of the warehouse was of great importance as it was believed that the spirits of grains were present to give the blessings to the whole village, the grounds where they stand were also believed sacred. The spiritual importance of the warehouses also embedded its social aspects when festivals were the embodiment of the community character of the traditional lifestyle and daily agricultural activities were also performed in this place in common. Unfortunately the use of the warehouse drastically declined and the spiritual beliefs totally disappeared, the warehouses still stand to testify the communal and social character of the traditional lifestyle.