Book Review

Swidden Enriches Local Communities in Japan: Community Development Starting from Burning

Reiji SUZUKI, Takanori OISHI, Kazuya MASUDA, and Yuki TSUJIMOTO (eds.), Kyoto: Mishosha, 2022*

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Swidden agriculture is a farming system in which open fields are prepared by burning the forest vegetation. It is also known as slash-and-burn agriculture or shifting cultivation. It has mainly been conducted in mountainous areas of tropical and subtropical regions by ethnic minorities in Asia. Recently, traditional swidden agriculture has been considered a sustainable way to produce food and use natural resources, as farmers cultivate the land in rotation for a few years after a long fallow period. This is why the method is also called shifting cultivation focusing on this feature, and why it is considered a sustainable way to use the region's forests in the long term. However, when large-scale farming expands into fields after the forest is cleared by fire without including a long fallow period, it can lead to deforestation and soil degradation. Although such environmentally hostile plantations and traditional swidden agriculture are fundamentally different, they are both often accused of being detrimental to the environment due to their common use of fire to clear fields.

In Japanese, swidden is *yakihata*, meaning "burnt field." As the Japanese term *yakihata* can imply any farming method involving fire, local and traditional swidden agriculture is often misunderstood to be the main cause of global environmental issues, even in Japan. Moreover, it is not widely known that swidden agriculture, or *yakihata*, has a long history in Japan and is still practiced today.

This book aims to dispel such misunderstandings and false impressions about swidden agriculture in Japan, and to raise awareness about its current practice. As the title suggests, it argues that continued and revived swidden agriculture could empower local communities in modern Japan.

Compiled by four editors, the book contains contributions from twenty-one authors, including the editors themselves, in the form of fourteen chapters, two columns, and some strip cartoons. The authors are from various backgrounds, including not only researchers but also local farmers, NPO staff members, public servants, a buckwheat noodle restaurant chef, and others. All of the authors are involved in local

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swidden agriculture practices and community development.

The contents are divided into three parts. The first part, comprising Chapters 1 to 3, was written by university academics to re-evaluate swidden agriculture in modern societies. In the introduction and Chapter 1, Reiji Suzuki clarifies the negative perceptions of swidden agriculture prevalent among the Japanese by reviewing past and contemporary academic research. He then identifies the new values of swidden agriculture in 21st-century Japan, such as conserving traditional culture, contributing to tourism and community development, managing forests, and encouraging research and education, although it can currently play only a minor role in food production. Chapter 2, written by Yuki Tsujimoto, describes the modern history of Japanese swidden agriculture. In the 1950s, more than a hundred thousand households in Japan were engaged in swidden agriculture; however, this figure declined drastically during the period of rapid economic growth. The author focuses on local initiatives aimed at revitalizing swidden agriculture in recent years and reports that, although these movements started individually, they have become interconnected through countrywide events organized by academics since the 2000s. In Chapter 3, Takanori Oishi points out that, compared to standardized conventional agriculture, swidden agriculture requires a repeated trial-and-error process, as there is no generalized optimal way of farming. He suggests this could contribute to its appeal to people.

The second part, comprising the next four chapters, introduces the various types of swidden agriculture that exist in Japan today. Masaru Shiiba, one of the authors of Chapter 4, is an inheritor of traditional swidden agriculture in southern Japan (Shiiba, Miyazaki Prefecture), which has continued since the Edo era. This region has been designated as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System by the FAO. In the same chapter, Masato Mochizuki, Hitomi Mochizuki, Osamu Tagata, and Fumio Sugimoto present their stories of the revival of buckwheat production through swidden cultivation after fifty years in central Japan (Ikawa, Shizuoka Prefecture) from different perspectives. Also, in northern Japan (Atsumi in Yamagata Prefecture and Murakami in Niigata Prefecture), swidden agriculture has been sustained by the production of locally grown original vegetables, such as the highly reputed heirloom varieties of red turnip, as reported in Chapter 5 by Jun Nakamura, Shinnosuke Suzuki, and Kimio Itagaki. Conversely, some swidden agriculture practices are not continued by the local people, but by outsiders. In Chapter 6, Fukui Yakihata no Kai describes a swidden case in Fukui Prefecture maintained by seasonal events, in which urban residents participate for recreation. In the same chapter, Toshiomi Hirayama reports that swidden agriculture in the process of reforestation in Kumamoto Prefecture is mainly carried out by domestic migrants. Chapter 7, written by Satoshi Yamaguchi, Masaki Omojiro, and Koichiro Koike, discusses the revival of swidden agriculture in Kochi and Shimane Prefectures. This revival has supported research and education by involving faculty members and students from national universities.

The third part comprises the final seven chapters and was written by researchers who are members of a group that carried out a swidden agriculture revival project with locals in Yogo, Shiga Prefecture, for around fifteen years from 2007. Chapter 8, written by Kazuya Masuda, reviews the year-on-year progress of the group's activities in Yogo since its establishment. In Chapter 9, Suehisa Kuroda introduces details of the farming techniques used in the project village and compares them with those used in neighboring villages. He also makes suggestions for further improvement. Chapter 10, by Motoko Shimagami, attempts to document past local livelihoods in the target village, including swidden agriculture, using information obtained through interviews with elderly local women. According to the author, the women used to undertake swidden agriculture in the village while the men produced charcoal, which was the main source of income at that time. Chapter 11, by R. Suzuki, examines

indigenous knowledge. For example, the author verifies the effects of burning on soil nutrients and plant germination using a scientific approach. In Chapter 12, Naohiko Noma, a plant ecologist, reports on his seven-year seed-selection project to fix genetically local cultivars of turnip. In Chapter 13, Motoko Kawano seeks new recipes to create a market for the revived local turnip with ambitious, creative chefs, referencing traditional cooking methods. In Chapter 14 and the conclusion, K. Masuda reconsiders the significance of outsiders' participation in local community development and suggests that development through swidden agriculture could be a valuable means of linking nature and humans as well as rural and urban areas. Finally, it is worth noting that the book is made more appealing by the strip cartoons by Yoshimi Nishimura.

This book is a unique achievement, drawing on the accumulation of numerous studies on swidden agriculture. Swidden agriculture is a controversial topic in social, academic, local, and global contexts, and it has attracted many researchers in various academic fields for a long time (see Sato 1999). In Japan, swidden agriculture was an important research topic in the 1970s, approached from the perspectives of the humanities and natural sciences (see Yokoyama et al. 2014). Sasaki (1972) and Fukui (1974), who wrote representative pioneering academic works on the subject, are also addressed in this book. At that time, swidden was also discussed as a means of revealing the origin and dispersal of Japanese agriculture (e.g., Sasaki 1971). However, after the 1970s, as swidden agriculture in Japan had almost disappeared, the interest of Japanese researchers had gradually shifted towards swidden agriculture in tropical regions, and the topic was almost forgotten in academia. This book, however, sheds new light on swidden agriculture and highlights its value in community development in modern Japan.

All of the authors of this volume have participated in community development projects on their own initiative. This book reveals the academic value of what they learned through these practical experiences. Through their experience of farming activities and social exchanges with locals, some of the authors realized the gaps between the local swidden agriculture and the characteristics typically identified by previous studies in Southeast Asia and Africa. In other words, it was their practical experience that made them aware of their own unconscious biases regarding swidden agriculture as presented in academic literature. For example, at the project site, herbaceous vegetation or grassland was preferred for farming over rich forest, and swidden agriculture was mainly maintained by women rather than men (see Chapters 10 and 14). Additionally, indigenous knowledge, one of the key themes of this book (Chapters 1, 3, and 14) was accidentally discovered during the practical work. A previously unknown technique for using fire was found when people encountered difficulties with burning (Chapters 9 and 11), and the hidden function of the traditional cropping calendar in preventing serious insect damage was realized when the outsiders experienced an insect outbreak (Chapter 11). Field studies with practical work remind us of the site-specific nature of agriculture, which is sometimes trivialized by scientific generalization. Although it may be challenging to reconcile field practice with scientific methods, as discussed in Chapter 11, it is hoped that the authors will find better ways to do so in the near future.

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