Cosmology and Ecological Recognitions Represented in Traditions: A Case Study of Muroya-mura, Niigata

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In this article I discuss the cosmology and the ecological recognitions represented in traditions which are told among the people of a small scale and secluded mountain village, Muroya-mura.

In the village of 32 households, people have two kinds of traditions with a few versions which say there had been one hundred households but became down to twenty at one time in Edo period. One tells the following story: the houses were divided into two hamlets, one sited on the east side of the Muroya River and the other did on the west side. In the biggest famine which occurred in 1780’s most of the villagers died of the famine. After that they had been forbidding to increase the number of households more than twenty until the beginning of Meiji era. This tradition is well known and often told not only by Muroya people but also people of all the villages which stand along the Muroya River.

Another tradition tells the following story with three versions: at one time in Edo period there were one hundred households and were two chiefs, one ruled the east side hamlet and the other did the west one. The chief of the east was ambitious and wanted to rule whole the village. One day the spirit of the large swamp which stands upper the east hamlet appeared in a figure of a beautiful woman and told him that the spirit would grant his ambition if he helped the swamp move below. Although the chief agreeded, the dwellers of the west side disturbed the swamp’s attempt and forced the chief to kill the spirit, which appeared in a figure of a big snake. The east hamlet disappered and the family of the chief died out because of the spirit’s cursing. It is the reason why there had been only twenty households on the west side of the river until the beginning of Meiji era.

An analysis of the traditions written above, village documents, other traditions which are held by each dozoku-dan, the social relationship inter and intra
dozoku-dan and the ecological situation of the village leads a conclusion that the traditions represent the people's cosmology and their profound recognitions of natural and social situations of the village.

The village stands in a narrow valley and have much snow in winter. In Edo period people is supposed to had lived on hunting, gathering, cut-and-burn planting, small scale rice planting and timbering. The village is surrounded by mountains but cannot get enough water for rice planting. For the cultural and social reasons, the villagers had been making an effort to scale up wet fields for rice growing because the scale of wet fields shows the social power of each family or dozoku-dan. In spite of their efforts, their attempts had been frustrated by the geological and geographical situations.

Additionally, the demographical problem had been serious since the village had high level village endogamy until 1950's. They had to make a balance of population not only between male and female but also inter and intra dozoku-dan because they had dozoku-dan exogamy. Population control is supposed to have been done by infanticides until the end of the nineteenth century.

Analyzing all the data, it could be said that the traditions represent the people's social and ecological recognitions gotten from their long term struggle to the their situations.