Upland Villages in Central Japan
—Ecology and Subsistence Economy—

SASAKI, Komei

Since early times in Japan, mountain dwellers adopted ways of life suited to natural environments. These inhabitants with their proper ways of life were called upland people. Lowland peasants were typical paddy cultivators, but the upland people were non-paddy cultivators. Paddy cultivation generally gives a good crop and secured livelihood and for this reason the subsistence economy of paddy cultivators tended to concentrate in paddy cultivation.

On the contrary, the subsistence activities of the upland people were much more diversified, because:

1) In mountains, slash-and-burn cultivation was the principal source of food production, but it was not as stable as the paddy cultivation. Consequently, it was necessary to secure food and other living necessaries by various production activities.

2) The physical environment of the uplands was much more complex and extensive than that of the lowlands. Consequently, the subsistence activities of upland people suited to this physical environment were much more diversified.

3) The upland people traditionally used a system of cognition of nature much more detailed and precise than that of lowland peasants. Moreover, with regard, clothing and shelter or other aspects of production activities, the upland people developed their own systems of cognition. The upland people developed their own value systems, completely different from that of lowland peasants. The further we look back to the past, the more evident is this tendency.

From the above points the author deduced the hypothesis that the cultural system of the upland people was originally completely different from that of the lowland peasants. The author has verified the above hypothesis in this
paper based on the data collected through his field surveys on villages around Hakusan and Akiyama-go in Central Japan and related historical literature.