Use of the Environment and Villages in Mountainous Regions during the Early Modern Period: The World of Akiyama in Shinano Province

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In the field of Japanese history there has been a tendency to call villages "noson" (farm villages) without paying sufficient attention to the environments, occupations and ways of life of individual villages. However, there is a major problem with this in that this name based on a simple classification obscures the development of skills and knowledge that make the most of the environment and the features of local lifestyles and society.

In this paper, I focus on the mountain village of Akiyama in Shinano Province and take a fresh look at variations in the perceptions of daily life that arose between landowners who lived on flatland and the inhabitants who lived on the mountains from the perspective of "lifestyle systems". This entails viewing events and phenomena in the region related to religious beliefs and aspects of life such as food, clothing and shelter as a broad system of life skills, knowledge and beliefs needed to live in the area, and is a useful perspective when investigating the characteristics of individual villages. In this paper I mainly examine the livelihoods of the people of Akiyama. This study has revealed that what the inhabitants desired was lasting use of the environment that was ordinary and small in scale rather than anything industrial and large in scale.

I examine the way that the inhabitants of Akiyama sometimes accepted and sometimes refused assistance from landowners, which is based on a pervasive fundamental concept that is a consciousness of "autonomy". This consciousness is a major reason for the villagers' refusal of assistance from landowners, who were not familiar with the "lifestyle system" particular to the mountainous terrain on which the inhabitants lived. There has previously been confusion between "independence" and "autonomy" when understanding the principles of behavior in villages. However, by making a clear distinction between the two it becomes easier to understand the world of "self-help" in pre-modern times.