

## The state of supporting sugarcane farming in Yaeyama Islands

Yaeyama Islands are an archipelago in the southwest of Okinawa Prefecture, Japan. There are 12 inhabited islands, five of which produce sugarcane as the main industry. In sugarcane production in the Yaeyama Islands, they usually rely on a labor force from outside the islands as support farming in the harvesting season from January to March. It has become difficult to have enough supporting labor force in recent years, and I had an opportunity to visit the islands to investigate the situation.

Brown sugar of Iriomote Island is considered rich and sweet among the Yaeyama Islands and it is also used by a long-established traditional Japanese sweetshop known for its “yokan”. A total of around 80 laborers are needed each year at production farms and sugar factories. These people are recruited by individual farmers, not collectively through producers’ co-operatives and working conditions such as accommodation facilities and wages are not standardized. Initially we thought it would be better to recruit from a wide candidate pool, but actually the recruitment gives priority to experienced people (repeaters). It seems farmers prefer to employ as many experienced workers as possible, rather than teaching unfamiliar ones from scratch every year.



**Sugarcane harvesting by supporting workers**



**Sugarcane collected in a sugar factory**

Because it was a great opportunity for me, I asked a farmer who owned the guest house where I was staying if I could experience sugarcane harvesting. The harvesting has become a little easier by using a machine called a “barikan (clipper)”, that cuts from the cane base. But in

parts of the fields such as the edges where the machine cannot reach cane must still be cut by hand. It was hard working in a crouching position to find intertwined roots and to cut sugarcane by hand. After that I removed leaves from sugarcanes using a hatchet, which was more hard work. It took me a long time and the results of my efforts were not completely satisfactory! I was exhausted in just half a day, but the concentrated work was refreshing. During the break, I talked to three seasonal workers who used to help another farmer before, but they settled to work with the present farmer because of the good character of the farmer and better facilities such as rooms and meals. The facilities and environment to stay differ depending on the farmers, and some of the rooms are just renovated warehouses and meals are self-catering. It seemed that the difference in such working conditions affected whether people repeated the temporary farming work or not.



**Iriomote brown sugar sold at a local supermarket**



**Enjoying eco-tours such as waterfall trekking in half a day**

Iriomote Island is rich in natural resources, and is aiming to be registered as a World Heritage Site along with northern Amami-Okinawa. You can enjoy a variety of sightseeing such as mangrove forest, waterfall trekking, and buffalo cart rides in half a day. We would like to seek ways to revitalize the sugarcane industry, which is a main stay of the island’s economy by making use of such local resources, as well as through efforts to connect urban and rural areas including development of farm stays /or migration facilitation.

(April 2018, by Yoshikura)