

Coexistence of Nature and Humans: Towards the 21st Century (6)

Part 6: Visit to Yashiro Village School

In the introductory article of this current series we mentioned Dr. Katsuo Otsuka, a keen promoter of the agricultural life style, who to our great sorrow passed away recently. To pay tribute to him we visited his Yashiro Village School, where 'agricultural lifestyle' activities have been, and are being, practiced.

Yashiro Village School is in Takahata-cho, in the north of Yonezawa, surrounded by the snow-capped Iide and Asahi mountain ranges. Paddy fields cover the plain, and grapes and cherries are cultivated on the mountain slopes. The paddy fields in front of Yashiro Village School had just been planted with young rice seedlings, and cows were lowing inside the stable. It was also the blossoming season for grapes, and despite the huge amount of work this brings, such as pruning vine branches, picking defective fruits and so on, Dr. Otsuka's elder brother and his wife, who have been continuing the activities of the Yashiro Village School in accordance with the late Dr. Otsuka's wishes, welcomed us with great hospitality. The mentors of Yashiro Village School are mainly farmers from the neighbourhood, and the school also receives students from elsewhere in Japan and sometimes trainees from abroad. A farmer who had looked after a Korean couple at Yashiro Village School told us heart-warming stories of his experiences with them. At the Goemon Hall - the hostel attached to the school - visitors can try using various traditional farming instruments. This building used to accommodate long-term visitors from urban areas, and today there are many people who have left the cities and taken to farming in Takahata-cho.

Surrounded by dishes of delicate brackens and konjak, we had a pleasant evening with Mr. and Mrs. Otsuka and the other members of the school. Japanese ginger and butterburs were also brought to the table straight from the garden, and we were reminded of the beautiful taste of fresh vegetables and of the richness of a self-sufficient lifestyle with food supplied from the locality. Such richness may be what we have lost in the process of rapid economic development. It is an important role of Yashiro Village School to make visitors realize this fact through experiencing agricultural life. However, it is also true, as Mr. and Mrs. Otsuka pointed out to us, that it is no easy task to keep Yashiro Village School running, and that the future of Japan's agriculture cannot be guaranteed simply by the promotion of 'hobby-style' farming.

While working in the field of technical cooperation for developing countries, we AAI staff experience both lives in the developed countries in which we are losing something important, and at the same time fully enjoying the convenience of high technology. We also experience life in developing countries where we can feel a richness of quality of life despite a certain degree of inconvenience. We think that the present civilization paradigm with its high levels of energy consumption is far from sustainable, and we doubt the wisdom of developing countries aiming at attaining such a style of civilization. The real way of survival for us may be found in the co-existence of nature and humans and in the search for sustainable ways of resources use. Keeping in mind the notion of 'co-existence of nature and humans', we would like to continue contributing to various activities aiming at achieving such a co-existence in Japan, as well as contributing to sustainable development in developing countries.

Lastly I would like to pray that the soul of Dr. Otsuka is at peace.



Yashiro Village School



Paddy fields and vineyard



Goemon Hall