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# LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND PILGRIMAGE ASSOCIATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF *ISEKO*

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## Introduction

I will report on Japanese historical and cultural content that some of you may not have experienced, even if you live in Japan. The story I am about to tell is about people who visit famous shrines. Pilgrimages have long been a tradition around the world, including *the Camino de Santiago* in Europe and *the Hajj* in the Muslim world. There are many pilgrimage routes in Japan, but today, the focus is on pilgrimages to the Ise Shrine, which have been immensely popular since the Edo Period.



Picture 1. *Ise-sangu Ryaku-zu*, by Hiroshige

<https://dl.ndl.go.jp/pid/1302527/1/2>

The Picture 1 drawn by Hiroshige, an *Ukiyo-e* artist of the late Edo period, illustrates a visit to the Ise Shrine. The framework of the wooden gate marks the entrance to the sanctuary. The painting depicts men and women dressed in a variety of costumes. In the Edo Period, there was a boom in people's desire to visit the Ise Shrine at least once in their lifetime, and many people from all over the country visited the shrine. However, free movement was still restricted during the Edo period, and people seldom traveled.

Under such circumstances, how were pilgrimages smoothly accomplished? In some cases, such as the Shikoku pilgrimage in Japan, the people in houses along the way helped the pilgrims. In the case of *Iseko*, such help was also available, but the Ise Shrine pilgrimage had more systematic solutions. One was that people of about 10 to 20 households formed an association for the pilgrimage. The association for the pilgrimage to the Ise Shrine is called *Iseko*. This type of association was organized all over Japan. Through this association system, people were able to finance their travel expenses and pass along their travel experiences on the pilgrimage to others.

So why were such organizations found throughout the country? During the Ise Shrine pilgrimage, the coordinators were priests living in Ise. Are there no coordinators in Islamic *Hajj* as well? In the case of the Ise Shrine pilgrimage, they were called *Onshi*, and they not only coordinated but also organized *Iseko* in each region. In this paper, through the stories of *Iseko* and *Onshi*, the author tries to illuminate how the pilgrimage connects to daily life in the community.

## Overview of Ise Shrine Pilgrimage

### Ise Shrine Pilgrimage in Edo Period

First, let us understand a little more about the overall picture of the Ise Shrine pilgrimage. Many people from all over Japan, except Hokkaido and Okinawa, participated in the Ise Shrine pilgrimage. During the Edo period, as the main roads and security improved, the environment gradually became more accessible for people to travel.

However, to prevent people from abandoning their villages, especially in rural areas, people's movements were restricted. Under these circumstances, visiting the Ise Shrine provided a good excuse for farmers to make the trip. This may have had something to do with the fact that one of the main deities of the Ise Shrine is related to rice. People may also have had faith in the deities of the Ise Shrine and, in fact, desired to dedicate *Kagura* to the shrine and receive paper

talismans. However, it was also seen as a valuable sightseeing opportunity, especially for the people of the time.



Picture 2. *Tokai-do 53 Eki Narabashi Ise Sangu Dochu-zu*

[https://www-user.yokohama-cu.ac.jp/~ycu-rare/pages/WC-0\\_132\\_06.html](https://www-user.yokohama-cu.ac.jp/~ycu-rare/pages/WC-0_132_06.html)



Picture 3. *Tokai-do Chu Hizakurige* by Jippensha Ikku

<https://dl.ndl.go.jp/pid/2559006/1/30>

As seen in the Picture 2, many guidebooks with maps and places of interest were published for pilgrims. The Picture 3 is an illustration from a 19th-century bestseller called *Tokaidochu Hizakurige*. The main story presented is not about the characters, the farmers, but about what happens to them on their pilgrimage to the Ise Shrine, which is depicted humorously.

## Organizing *Iseko*

People with enough money or those living near the Ise Shrine might have found it relatively easy to make the pilgrimage. But the majority of people who were not in such a situation created the first association for pilgrimages. In Japan, an association for a specific purpose, especially one related to Shintoism or Buddhism, is sometimes called *Ko*.

Among *Ko*, *Iseko* is a system in which all members contribute money to the *Ko*, and the money is used to send representatives on pilgrimages. For example, if 20 people give 100 yen each, it amounts to 2,000 yen. This is applied to travel expenses of 1,000 yen per person, and two people are sent out on the pilgrimage as representatives. Once a person has made the pilgrimage, he or she will not be a representative again until everyone has made the pilgrimage. In this example, two persons would make the pilgrimage each year, so all 20 persons would experience the pilgrimage over a ten-year period.

By the way, people can create any *Ko* as will, and there are countless varieties. However, there are some *Ko*, like *Iseko*, whose organization has spread throughout Japan. For example, it is common in other *Ko* besides *Iseko* to have members pay annual dues to the group, and only one person receives the money. This can be called a *Ko* for finance. In some cases, the original connection with faith disappears, and only the financial aspect remains. It could be said that this type of scheme is the same as “microcredit” or rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs) found around the world.

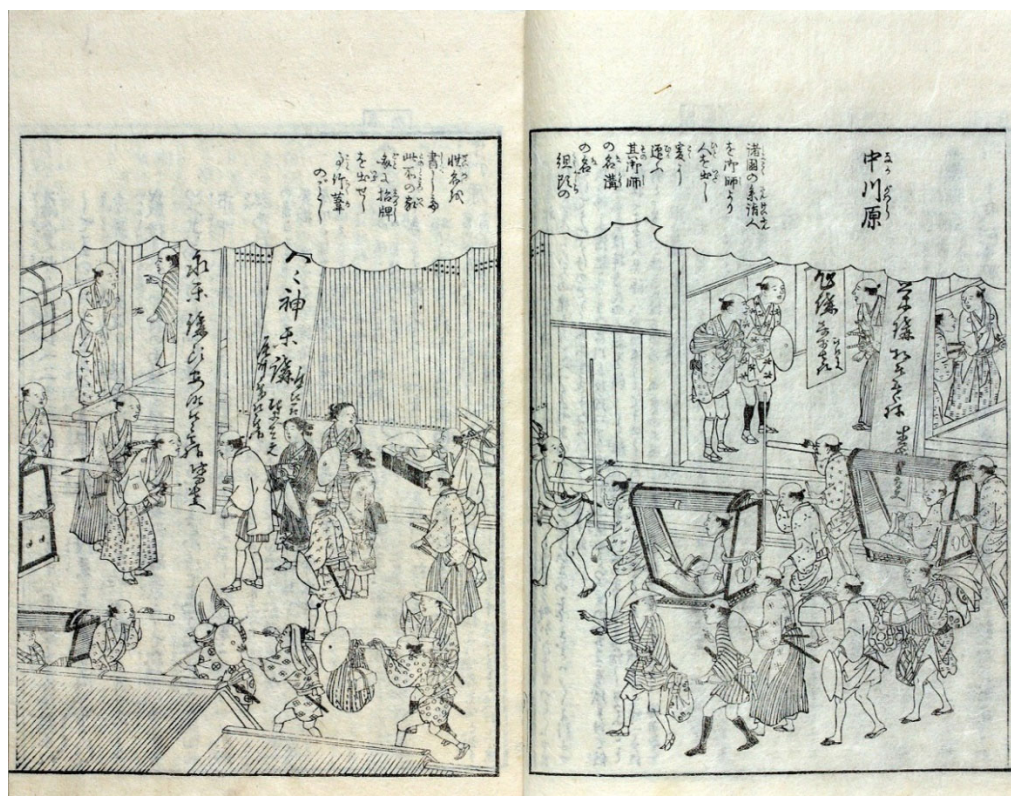
There are other *Ko* that have a banquet every 60 days for everyone to get together and stay up all night. This is based on the Chinese belief that the insects in the body report one’s bad deeds to the deity once every 60 days. To prevent them from reporting to the deity, people try to stay awake so that they do not leave the body. If this *Ko* is successful 18 times in three years, a stone pagoda may be built to commemorate the accomplishment, and these pagodas can be found all over the country, as seen in the image above.

Many *Ko* are organized as small regional units, but they can also be larger projects that transcend geographical boundaries. For example, the name *Ko* is sometimes used as a fundraising method when significant costs are involved, such as installing a streetlight on a main road or for

recovery expenses following a serious disaster. In other words, in the present-day sense, it is crowdfunding. In this case, membership is not necessarily relevant.

### Onshi Who Coordinates the Pilgrimage

Let us return again to the story of the Ise Shrine pilgrimage. *Onshi* arranged accommodations for the pilgrimage, processed the dedication of *Kagura*, and prepared paper talismans to take back to the village. The people of *Iseko* were able to make the pilgrimage with peace of mind because they had an *Onshi* in charge.

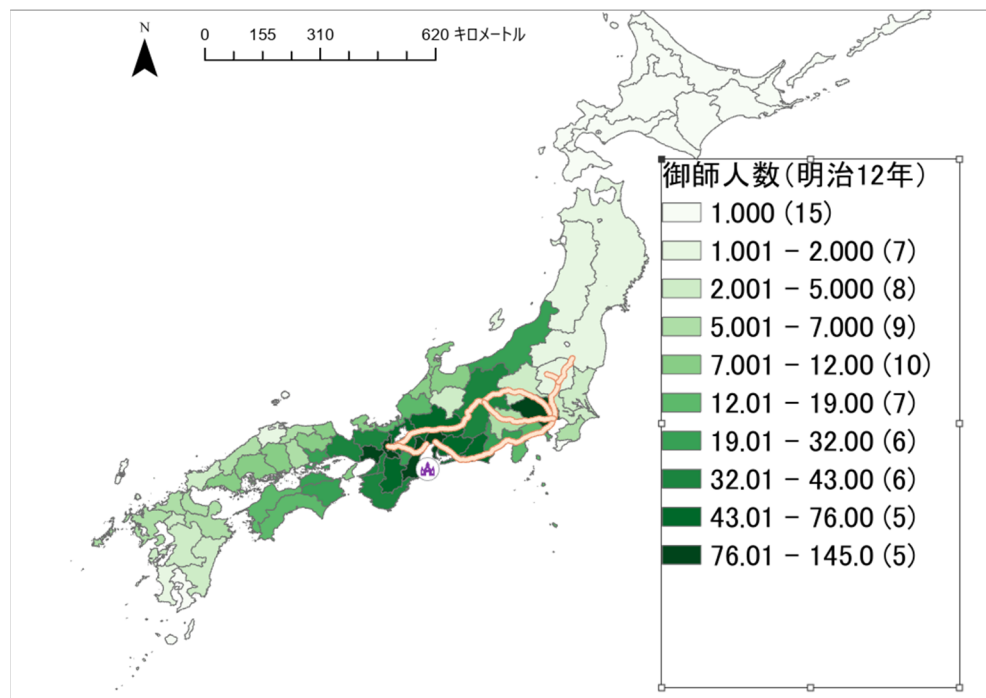


Picture 4. *Ise Sangu Meisho Zue*

Mie Prefectural Museum <https://www.bunka.pref.mie.lg.jp/MieMu/82944046631.htm>

The Picture 4 shows the staff of the *Onshi* welcoming the *Ko* people upon their arrival at the lodge. The *Onshi* of the Ise Shrine were priests who lived near the shrine, and there were nearly 1,000 of them. Each one was in charge of a particular area, and they were also responsible for organizing the *Iseko* in that area.

*Onshi* areas were a kind of entitlement and subject to sale. The author compiled a database of documents related to the entitlements to *Onshi* in the Meiji period and summarized them by prefecture at that time using a geographic information system. However, since the Ise Shrine has two major shrines, *Geku* and *Naiku*, it is restricted to the *Onshi* in charge of *Geku*, which is closely related to agriculture.



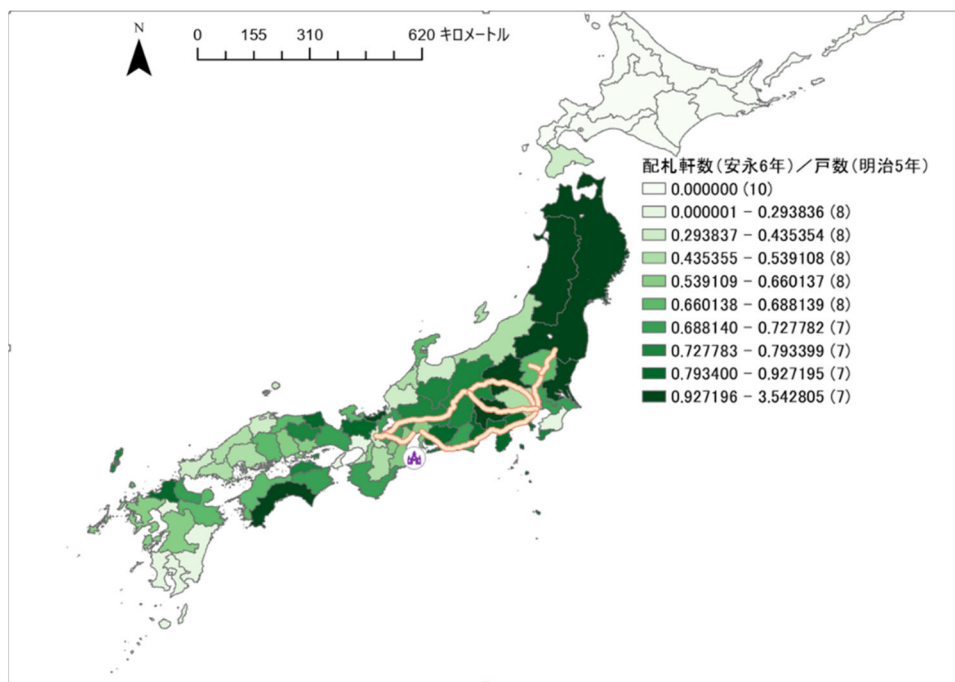
Picture 5. Number of *Onshi*(*Geku*) entitlements by Prefecture in 1879

Prepared by the author.

On the map shown as Picture 5, it is easy to see that in 1879, during the Meiji Era, at least one *Onshi* was in charge of every prefecture in Japan, except Okinawa. Interestingly, it appears that there was also an *Onshi* in charge of the northernmost island, Hokkaido. The Ise Shrine, where the marker is located, also seems to have had its entitlements subdivided. Furthermore, Tokyo, the capital, had more than 100 *Onshi*. Those familiar with Japan may wonder why there were so many *Onshi* in Niigata Prefecture. In fact, in the Meiji period, Niigata Prefecture was a densely populated rural area that sometimes topped the population list.

While the number of *Onshi* is informative, there can be cases where, for example, “one *Onshi* was in charge of a very large number of *Ko*,” so other data are needed for analysis. So,

let's look at the number of paper talismans distributed and counted around 1777, shown in Picture 6. Data for the number of talismans are available for the Edo period, about 100 years before data for the number of *Onshi* became available.



Picture 6. Number of paper talismans distributed per households by Prefecture around 1777

Prepared by the author.

The number of talismans was divided by the number of houses in each region and normalized to show on the map. This shows that the areas near the Ise Shrine, Tokyo, and Niigata do not have extremely high numbers. On the other hand, we can see that many talismans were distributed in parts of Shikoku and the entire Tohoku region. This may be because there were many pilgrims in these areas. Or perhaps in these regions, talismans were requested per individual rather than per household. In any case, these data show that pilgrimages were active not only near the Ise Shrine or near the capital, but also in rural areas, and that the situation varied from region to region.

As we have shown, *Onshi* had entitlements throughout the country, *Iseko* was created, and a system was in place for pilgrimages. However, as the Meiji government searched for a new national Shinto system, it abolished the *Onshi* system. Some *Onshi* continued to maintain ties with



their local *Iseko*, demonstrating their business sense even after the abolition of the system. However, other *Onshi* fell into poverty. Under these circumstances, it was necessary to confirm the entitlements of the *Onshi* at the time of the abolition of the system in order to create a policy of compensation, and a survey was conducted. By creating a database of the results of that survey, I was able to create the map you saw on the previous slide.

## A Survey on Ise Pilgrimage Associations

### Typical Flow of *Iseko*

There are many variations, depending on the region and period, but here is one typical flow of *Iseko*.

First, a New Year's party is held. Until around 1970, the party was held at the house of the person in charge of the year, which was determined by rotation. Now, participants gather at the house once, worship at the altar of the Ise Shrine in the room, and then take a microbus to the restaurant. At the New Year's party, a lottery or other method is used to determine the representative who will make the pilgrimage that year.

Second, the representative makes a pilgrimage to the shrine during the farming off-season. There is no mention of *Onshi* at all in research sites of the author, so I expect that they continued on their own. They received a paper talisman for those who did not go.

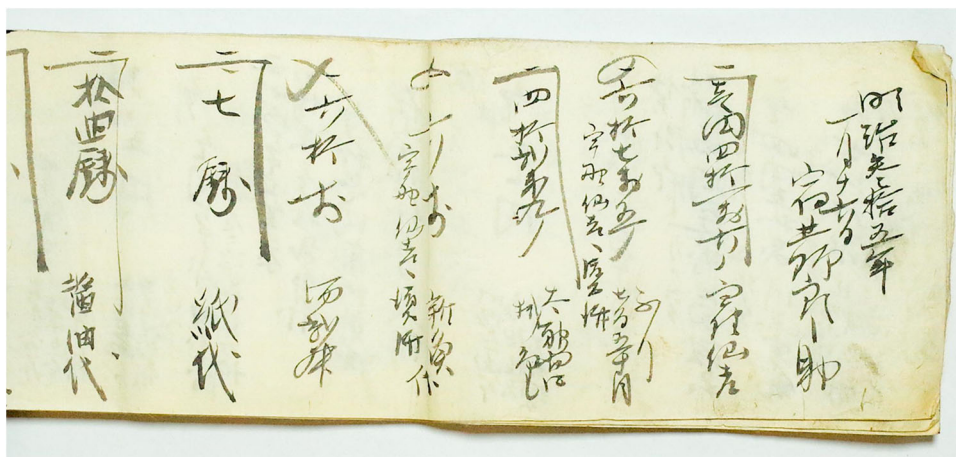
Third, a welcome banquet is held for the representatives returning from their journey. The representatives distribute paper talismans to the members and share stories about their journey. However, the research found that this banquet was discontinued during the war and has not been held since.

Fourth, during the farming season, the *Ko* will cultivate the common rice fields that it owns.

### Source Materials for Research

The case study here is based on the accounting books of five adjacent *Iseko* that the author collected in one area of Shiga Prefecture. Shiga Prefecture is close to the Ise Shrine, so a walking trip would take one or two nights, and a day trip can be made by train.

The account books show the income and expenses of each association. Most expenditures are for food and beverages for the New Year's party. There were no details of travel expenses for the representatives.



Picture 7. A page from an account book written on January 16, 1902. Photo by the author.

Each association kept its documents related to *Iseko* in a wooden box, which was passed down from year to year to a person in charge who took over on a rotating basis. The Picture 7 is an example of a page from an account book. As this paper will show later, the account books list income and expenses that have nothing to do with the pilgrimage. In addition, many documents unrelated to the pilgrimage were found in the same box. It seems that the *Iseko* in this area played a comprehensive role in the community, not only for pilgrimages. This is why there was a mixture of seemingly unrelated materials in the box.

## Income

Before the war, *Iseko* owned a common rice field as a source of income. It was the duty of the members to cultivate and harvest these fields. People who could not participate in this work were charged in cash.

After the war, farmland reform made it systematically impossible to share rice fields. The figure above is a deed from 1948, when the prefecture purchased the rice fields of *Iseko* in this area. Therefore, another source of income became necessary after the war, and what was utilized from the late 1960s onward was the cash obtained from tax incentives. Until around 2005, each region had a system of paying cash to taxpayer associations as a tax incentive in the name of

administrative expenses. During the 40 years of this system, *Iseko*'s New Year's party was the main use of the shared cash from tax payments in the area.

However, this was a period when many people left *Iseko* at the same time, creating a gap between members of the taxpayers' cooperative and members of *Iseko*. At times when there was no common income, each association collected annual dues from its members.

### Expenditure Except for Party

The majority of expenditures are for banquets. In addition, the ordinary expenses of the local shrine were paid by the *Iseko*. Here are some other distinctive expenditures.

*Iseko* paid taxes before the war. No wonder this tax is on rice fields because they are common fields. However, in reality, something like an inhabitant tax was also paid as *Iseko*. During wartime, the cost of tools and parting gifts was expended to send off those who were conscripted.



Picture 7. Photo of students at the time of their departure for war (on the street in front of the shrine) in 1943.

Fukuzawa Memorial Center for Modern Japanese Studies, Keio University

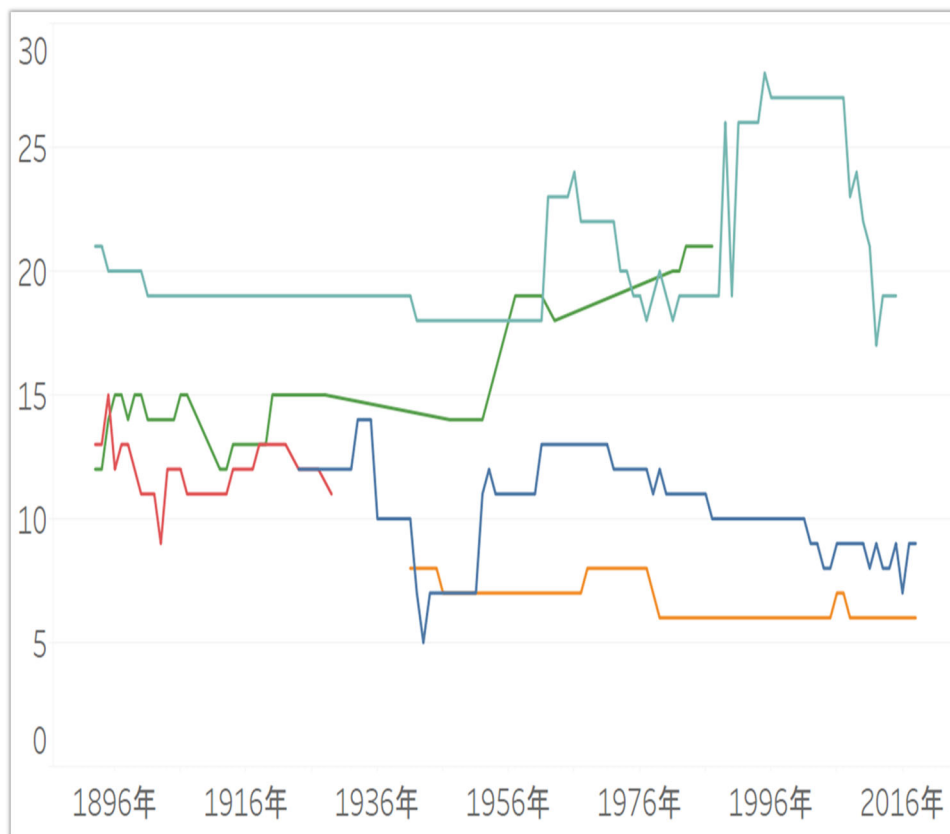
[https://jmapps.ne.jp/fmckeio/det.html?data\\_id=106](https://jmapps.ne.jp/fmckeio/det.html?data_id=106)

The Picture 7 is not from the survey site, but from the same period in the collection of Keio University. As seen in this photo, young people were sent out waving small national flags. In addition, *Iseko* paid for red and white cloth for farewells, condolence money for the war dead, and air-raid candles. If *Iseko* is simply an association for pilgrimages, this is a rather strange expenditure that has nothing to do with pilgrimages.

After the war, expenditures other than pilgrimages were limited to the ordinary expenses of local shrines. In other words, the function of *Iseko* became limited to its original purpose.

## Membership

*Iseko* is an association for pilgrims, so membership is voluntary in some areas. However, it seems that the five introduced here were assumed to be joined in principle. Since *Iseko* rarely keeps a membership list in its account books, the author has graphed the number of members over about 120 years based on the number of fish that were purchased each year, shown in Picture 8.



Picture 8. Estimated number of members in the five *Iseko*.

Prepared by the author.

Membership in one association increased 1.5 times in the 1970s but returned to its original level around 2005. The new residents, who increased in the 1970s, were in the taxpayers' association but not in *Iseko*. Nevertheless, the community decided to allocate the cash earned by the taxpayers' cooperative to the *Iseko*'s New Year's party.

To resolve this discrepancy, a campaign was launched to get everyone in the tax cooperative to join *Iseko*. As already explained, the system of incentives for taxpayer cooperatives ended in 2005. *Iseko* continues in the area, but it is limited to households that have lived in the area for a long time.

## Findings

### *Iseko*'s Comprehensive Role

At the site, *Iseko* clearly functioned and positioned itself beyond the original purpose of the pilgrimage. In a discussion on the relationship between association and community, the author has argued that some associations have a special position that can be called a fundamental association.

A fundamental association plays a comprehensive role in the continuity of the community itself, often based on an association created for a specific purpose. In this case, *Iseko* was the fundamental association, and it varied from region to region. Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that any association can become a fundamental association, and the author would be interested in researching what types of associations might fit the criteria in various regions in the future.

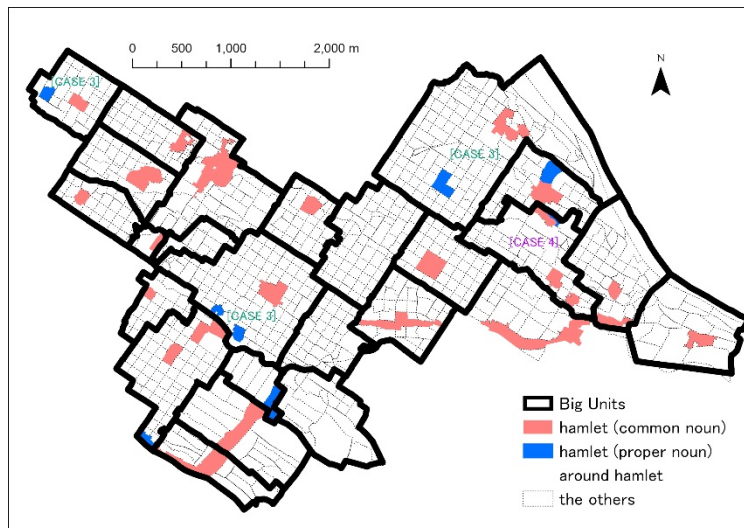
In postwar Japan, the organizations that form the foundation of communities have been standardized, and neighborhood associations have taken on this role entirely.

### Local Community Units

With modernization, regional units have come to be viewed in a uniform manner. In other words, the administrative village of the Meiji period came to be viewed as if it were a unit of living. However, our living space is made up of layers of disparate regions.

In previous studies, the focus has often been on current and former administrative units of local governments. But a fundamental association may be based on a smaller, unique unit, as we have seen here. The *Iseko* introduced each had a name as if it were a town, but the name was never used otherwise and did not exist historically.

In recent years, the author has been focusing on old maps because he wants to know the units of hidden subregions. He is exploring the information hidden in place names by reproducing and analyzing on a geographic information system the spatial boundaries and small place names from old maps in the early Meiji era, shown in Picture 9.



Picture 9. An example for an analysis of small place names presented in the American Association for Geographers.

## Repertoire of Symbiosis

It is also important to note that *Iseko* was widely propagated through *Onshi*. In other words, *Iseko* was a package modularized by *Onshi*, and each region could decide whether to accept and utilize it. Of course, *Iseko*'s base may be religious, but the simple pleasures of feasting and traveling are essential elements in adopting this repertoire. How one accepts folk customs as a propagated repertoire depends on the original society of the recipient. This is how cultural mixing occurs.

Another example is the *Sagicho*, a folk custom of the New Year, which is also a common repertoire. It is a repertoire that helps connect children with their local communities, and, in this respect, it may find similarities with Halloween. The Picture 10 is from a book the author wrote about *Sagicho*. As you can see from the cover photo, it is an event in which a large flame is set ablaze. It is an event related to the god of the year, but there is also the simple pleasure of watching the flames and dancing around them.



Picture 10. *Sagicho*: a folk event in the New Year's season.

We should already be well familiar with the joy and significance of banquets. These make up the repertoire for what constitutes a symbiotic society. In our society, various ideas and values must undeniably coexist. In this context, primitive enjoyment is a useful element to connect people in their experiences.

Moreover, it is not only people of the same ideology who gather together, but also people who are forced to participate in a certain way. This is why we can think, “How to live in a connection we cannot choose?”

The author was thinking while listening to Professor Iba's lecture yesterday, titled "Supporting People's Life with Pattern Languages that Describe the Essence of Folk Knowledge of Practices," that repertoire here is a generative concept that potentially includes tradition and variability, and could be said to mean something close to *kata*.

### Making Research "Public"

Furthermore, recalling yesterday's lecture, the author added this section because he thinks both Professor Nomura and Professor Iba were sending the message that we, the audience yesterday, should be practitioners ourselves. Frankly speaking, the author used to be inclined to think that researchers should just concentrate on their research and let someone else put their findings to use and put them into practice. Nevertheless, he has engaged in the practice of holding many workshops each year, developing activities to prevent children from becoming delinquents, and serving as a training instructor for abuse coping professionals. In the process of engaging in such practices, his thinking has gradually changed in recent years, and he has finally realized that researchers themselves need to make efforts to conduct research in a way that is more open to the public, and that this is a meaningful thing to do. Perhaps a major factor in changing views was an exposure to the idea of public history and other public humanities.

The author would like to share a recent attempt by him and his colleagues to make our research public. He has recently written a report on the concept of repertoire and public humanities. And he will be an editor of the book on public history, and about 15 researchers are writing a book on public history, which will be published in two years as a volume of the Keio Institute of East Asian Studies series.

In addition, the author is currently working with a non-profit organization in Shiga Prefecture to interview residents about their memories of their homes. The focus is on the housing, but the conversation invariably extends to the community and family. They believe that the experience of conducting these interviews itself can be a resource for experience-based tourism, and they have asked students to accompany us on these interviews. As a researcher, the author was responsible for creating interview guidelines for the public and archiving materials found during the research process.

The author conducts his research in an extremely simple way. I have asked dozens of people for their life histories, read thousands of account books, and have databased thousands of place names and maps. And he believes that if we read people's stories and documents carefully, we can find clues to better understand society.