

Report of Kagamino Town (former Tomi Village) Oh Hamlet  
Reinvestigation Project



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## **Introduction: Overview of the reinvestigation project**

In examining the future of Japanese society including Okayama Prefecture, particularly local communities, especially so-called "marginalized communities" which are suffering from ageing depopulation, it is essential to first understand the historical transformation of local communities in the post-World War II period and their current challenges.

In the early years of Okayama University's founding (1950s), Sumio Taniguchi (later President) and others led the "Society for Joint Study of the Inland Sea Areas " to conduct a detailed and cross-disciplinary comprehensive survey of farming, mountain, and fishing hamlets (Kitaike in Okayama, Tanoura in Shimotsui, and Oh in Tomi).

In addition, since 2018, Okayama University has concluded comprehensive cooperation agreements with 10 municipalities in former Mimasaka province and others. They are implementing cooperation based on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Oh Village Reinvestigation Project is a joint project (commissioned by the Hashimoto Foundation), to re-examine the Oh hamlet area of current Kagamino town, one of the three hamlets, to understand the changes over the 70 years since the end of the war, current issues, and future prospects.

The project was led by Masaru Kaga, General Coordinator of Okayama Global Academic Capital Headquarters (Senior Vice President in charge of Social Collaboration / Professor) and Ken Aoo (Associate Professor at the Graduate School of Social and Cultural Sciences), with Associate Professor Hisashi Datai (agricultural economics and resource management), Specially Appointed Professor Yoshimasa Hashigaya (design), Associate Professor Kyoko Honda (rural sociology), Emeritus Professor Yoshimi Hyodo (basic nursing science), Professor Doo-Chul Kim (rural geography), Associate Professor Hiroshi Takano (cultural geography), and other researchers and students from Okayama University participating in the survey. The Social Cooperation Division of the General Affairs and Planning Department was in charge of administrative work.

In this study, research team mainly conducted i) key person interviews (Kagamino Town government, Sakushu-Kagamino Forestry Cooperative, Farm Tomi, Tomi Furusato Public Corporation, and others) and resident life history interviews, and conducted additional literature and data research. However, due to the new coronavirus outbreak after February 2020, the planned resident questionnaire survey and resident group discussions could not be conducted, and instead some of the interviews were conducted as online interviews. The

survey period was extended twice from May 2019 to March 2020 to September 2022.

The survey result was published as a book entitled "*Life in Mountain Village Revisited: 70 Years in Oh hamlet of Northern Okayama Prefecture*" (Kibito Publishing), and this survey report (in Japanese and English) was also prepared as an outcome of the survey.

**Photos**



**Oh hamlet in the 1950s**  
(from *Life in Mountain Village*)



**Oh hamlet and surrounding**



**Oh hamlet now**



**2019 Autumn Festival**



**Resident interview**



**Resident interview**

## Chapter 1 70 year history of Oh hamlet: Overview

### 1-1. Changes in 70 years

At the time of the last survey in 1952, Oh hamlet (formerly Oh-aza Oh hamlet, Tomi village, Tomata County, Okayama Prefecture) had a total of 47 households with a total population of approximately 250 people, including 25 (10%) whom were 66 years old or older. At that time, before the energy revolution, Oh hamlet was a mountain village with rich income from the mountains, including firewood, timber, *mitsumata* (*Edgeworthia chrysantha*), *abemaki* (*Quercus variabilis*, bark used as the substitute for cork), and *konnyaku* (konjac). The relatively homogeneous structure of the Oh hamlet, shrine rites and festivals, and a variety of mutual aid mechanisms (*ko*, *kabu* (kinship group), and *tema-gae* (joint work of common land and farming)) indicate the strong ties with in the community in Oh hamlet.

After 70 years of time, the situation of the village has changed dramatically. In 2019, the population of the village became less than 50 people, the majority of residents are 65 years and over. While road infrastructure has made transport more convenient and provided shopping, healthcare and education services from the outside world, the village's primary school (branch school) and shops have all closed. Many of the villagers found works outside the village, as a result, because of the limitation of the time, *ko* and *temagae* were abolished. The organisation of the public administration and agricultural cooperative has also changed as a result of the merger of Tomi Village to Kagamino Town in 2005. Meanwhile, new organisations and activities such as Farm Tomi, an agricultural corporation, the Tomi Hometown Promotion Corporation and the Tomi Community Development Council exist and play a role in supporting the ageing village.

### 1-2. How to understand these changes

How can we understand these changes in Oh hamlet over the past 70 years? As is typical in Japanese farming and mountain villages, young people left the villages and migrated to urban areas during the period of rapid economic growth in Oh hamlet, then, with a few exceptions, they have not returned back to the home. In contrast, the development and diffusion of roads and automobiles has made it possible for people to live in the villages and hamlets while working and commuting to work in the neighbouring urban areas, so the number of villages and hamlets that have left their homes, as seen in the mountainous areas of the Chugoku region, is relatively small. This allowed the area to continue to operate as a village or hamlet despite a significant reduction in population. The daily lives of the residents are not confined to the village and hamlet as it used to be, however, are becoming more regionally expanded ('urbanisation' of rural areas).

In terms of livelihoods, as a result of losing diverse sources of income such as charcoal and specialising in planted forests (cedar and cypress) during the period of high economic growth, the region was able to enjoy 'good times' until around the 1980s, with policy support from the Forest Service and others. However, when timber prices fell, they lost the livelihoods that supported the region. Agriculture has traditionally been of a subsistence nature and not a dependable source of income, so the remaining residents of the Oh hamlet had to live as type-2 dual-income farmers (farming households which have income from agriculture as secondary income) with full-type jobs in the nearby cities. This is now approaching its limits due to the ageing of the population, and many are left to outside agricultural enterprises.

Local cultural events such as festivals are continued, although many have been simplified. However, in recent years the younger generation has tended to move to urban areas for reasons such as education for their children. The population decline and ageing population - one-fifth the number of inhabitants and half the number of households compared to 70 years ago - are endangering the very survival of the Oh hamlet. At the same time, both the local government and agricultural cooperatives that support the area have become more extensive due to organizational merger, and it is becoming harder to expect generous and detailed support. In these ageing areas, a variety of life issues will continue to arise, which may create a gap between what can be covered by both the local community and the government.

Followings are the main predicted issues for the region in the future:

- i) How to protect objective and subjective well-being (good physical, mental and social health), such as health and human networks;
- ii) How to ensure access to a variety of services, including health care, long-term care, education, shopping and mobility, while continuing to live in the hamlet;
- iii) How to secure livelihoods and income to support the lives of residents, especially how to create local industries and income for local production and consumption in the community;
- iv) How the governments, local communities, local organisations and external organisations such as universities, foundations and nonprofits can work together to address these challenges.

By addressing these issues, we will be able to make well-being in lives for those who wish to live in rural areas in reality, including current residents and prospective newcomers.



## **Chapter 2 Change of “village survey” and what the (re-)investigation at Oh hamlet means**

### **2-1. History of “village survey”**

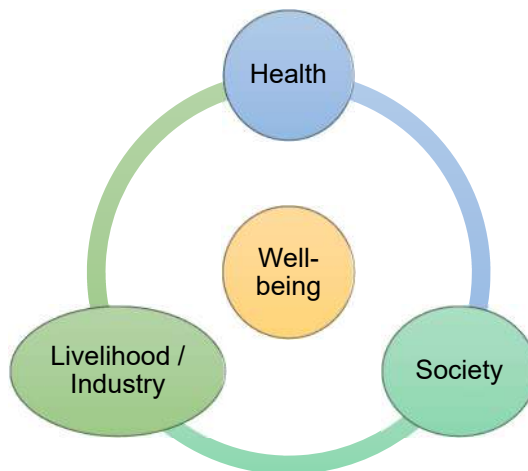
In modern Japanese academia, villages or hamlets were of primary interest as objects to govern. Furthermore, this continued to be intertwined with colonial studies and folklore studies. The United States, on the other hand, embarked on Japanese studies to 'know the enemy' during and after the World War II, which led to the study of Japanese society as an area study, for the purpose of controlling and 'modernising' the occupied territories, even after the war. As part of this, the Center for Japanese Studies at the University of Michigan opened its Okayama Field Office in 1950 and conducted a 'comprehensive village survey' with researchers from a variety of specialisations. In response to this movement, Japanese researchers, including Assistant Professor (later President) Sumio Taniguchi of Okayama University, which had just been newly established at the time, learnt fieldwork and other methods while cooperating with the University of Michigan's research, then, conducted their own surveys of farming, forestry and fishing villages. The Oh hamlet was one of such examples.

After the University of Michigan's Center for Japanese Studies left Okayama in 1955, interdisciplinary 'comprehensive village studies' in Japan began to decline as academia became increasingly specialised. However, today, in considering so-called 'wicked problems' involving diverse factors such as climate change, inequality and poverty, there is a need for 'integrated research' across diverse disciplines in academia. While one-way surveys / research by 'rulers' and the 'researchers' who enjoy a privileged position connected to them has lost its ethical legitimacy, there is a need to show how research can be 'co-created' with communities and people.

### **2-2. New possibilities for village surveys**

In conducting new forms of academic research to deal with 'wicked problems', as well as research on Japan that has international significance, village surveys that take a comprehensive perspective and place the community within the contexts of Japanese society and economy, as well as the global structure have great potential. This reinvestigation of Oh hamlet is also an attempt to review and communicate the results from the time frame of 70 years of Japanese society and from the perspective of Japan and the world as a whole, even though it is limited to a single area in northern Okayama Prefecture. The aim is to reconstruct and analyse the transformation and meaning of 'modernisation' to Japanese society from the perspective of a single mountain village, and by presenting the current situation in Oh hamlet

and depicting the activities and thoughts of the people living there, to obtain suggestions on the nature of 'well-being' for the ageing population and the local area (Fig. 2-1).



**Figure 2-1: Concept of people / communities' well-being**

As a method, the 'comprehensive' survey, in which researchers from different fields of expertise share information and exchange their perspectives, will help to understand the community as a whole. In the course of this reinvestigation, we also hope to consider with local people what is required for the future of such communities. When the research team was talking to the residents for the resurvey of Oh hamlet this time, one of the older people said, "I don't want you to do a survey for the sake of a survey, I want you to think together about how this hamlet can survive in the future". This person has been researching the history and culture of the area and has helped many researchers with their research, but he said that the content of the research is "fine as research, but it does not help the hamlet".

This statement was to remain a major homework assignment for the group of researchers in the Oh hamlet resurvey throughout the survey period. Can intermittent research by a limited number of researchers be used to write prescriptions for a village or region? Would this not lead to the subsequent failure of the assertions made by 'outside researchers' as seen in *Life in the Mountain Village*, or the suggestion that 'this is what should be done

Oh hamlet resurvey is therefore an attempt by each researcher to include not only research and analysis, but also 'recommendations' as far as they can. This may be far from the solutions sought by the local people. However, we hope that it can at least be seen as an effort to move from research that looks at the region and its inhabitants as 'objects' (on village) to research that is 'for village' or 'think with villagers' (with village).

Finally, the main purpose of this survey is to show where society, including Japan's rural areas, could end up at the end of modernisation, falling birth-rates and ageing populations by presenting a picture of the Oh hamlet - whether this would be a devastated society where the momentum of economic growth has ceased and people and communities have lost their vitality, or whether it could be a 'prosperous society' built around a different set of values. This is a new kind of Japanese studies that can be transmitted from Japan, a frontrunner country with diverse issues such as ageing and depopulation. It is important to note that, even if this transmission is to be made to the world, it is not only the West but also neighbouring Asian countries who would be the most relevant audiences. The work of talking about Japanese society to such listeners is not only an open sharing of information from Japan to the world and Asia, but also an attempt to position the present Japan within the world and Asia.

## **Chapter 3 Potential for value-added creation through local industries in mountain villages**

### **3-1. Changes in the industrial structure of the former Tomi village and Oh hamlet**

The 'hollowing out of villages' in mountainous areas has become increasingly serious since the 1990s. This was caused by the 'hollowing out of people' due to the outflow of the adult population and the 'hollowing out of land', which is a reduction in the area of agricultural land. In order to control this, a minimum population control within the region and the management of local resources, or the creation of added value using local resources through local industry, are required. However, according to data from the Census of Agriculture and Forestry, the number of agro-forestry operators in the former Tomi Village and Oh hamlet has decreased significantly by 50-60% compared to 15 years ago, which indicating the seriousness of the situation.

The industrial transition of the former Tomi village after World War II can be organised into three stages: 1) the wood and coal industry from the post-war period to the period of high economic growth; 2) the agro-forestry industry such as shiitake mushroom and breeding cattle farming from the 1970s to the 1990s; and 3) the forestry industry and commuting work outside the village after the 1990s. Since the period of high economic growth, the forest vegetation in Tomi Village has changed as a result of afforestation from mixed hardwoods for firewood and charcoal to softwoods for timber such as cedar and cypress. At present, there is a forestry groups that undertakes forestry work together with the Sakushu-Kagamino Forestry Cooperative, but the logged trees are mainly traded on the log market in Maniwa City, which create a small source of added value.

The Morie Sawmill, located in Oh hamlet, uses water power as its source of power, which is a very rare example throughout the country. The mill was started in 1926 by the first generation, who is the grandfather of the current owner, Ms. Shizuko Sawayama, and later improved by the second generation, Sawayama's father who changed the power source from a water wheel to a turbine. The company is not taking on any new work, then, plans to close down in the not-too-distant future.

### **3-2. What can be learnt from the survey of the former Tomi Village and Oh hamlet**

In the above, the industrial structure within the region in the post-war period and a very unique example of a sawmill factory were investigated in order to examine the potential for value-added creation within the region in the former Tomi Village / Oh hamlet of Kagamino Town, Okayama Prefecture.

In former Tomi village, added value has been created by utilising the mountain forests as a local resource. Before the period of high economic growth, added value was created through a process whereby the owner of the local resources, the mountain owner supplied the raw materials, the labour resources in the village processed them into charcoal, then, the charcoal was sold throughout the country. Since 1990, the main industry has been forestry using coniferous trees planted after the charcoal industry. In this forestry industry, local resource management is carried out by forestry groups. Many former charcoal burners are active members of the mountain work groups. Consequently, the skills and knowledge gained from charcoal production are used.

At the Morie Sawmill in Oh hamlet (Figure 3-1), almost everything that comes out of the sawmilling process is used even if it is not lumber. For example, large scraps are used as formwork material, small scraps are used as firewood for campsites, sawdust is used as mulch for fields (e.g. for udo cultivation) and straw for livestock, and so on. In other words, the cascade use of trees produced in the region is considered to create maximum added value. Furthermore, the Morie Sawmill also uses hydraulic power for sawmilling and is self-sufficient in energy in the region. This means that the part of the value-added process that flows out of the region is very small, which is an ideal system for a region like Oh hamlet. In addition, three generations have been in the lumber business for more than 100 years and have accumulated skills and knowledge in the utilisation of local resources, such as the ability to identify logs and processing techniques. This skills and knowledge are the driving force behind the creation of added value through the utilisation of local resources.



**Figure 3-1: Morie Sawmill**

Photo by Hisashi Datai

On the other hand, Shizuko Sawayama, representative of Morie Sawmill, stated that since the 2004 typhoon, the water volume in the waterways that provide power to the sawmill has become more unstable, with the water quickly rising during heavy rainfall and, conversely, quickly drying up during low rainfall. This is due to the fact that mountain forests have been severely damaged by typhoons and have become rough. Hence, Sawayama points out the importance of mountain forest management. She added: "Timber from mountains that are properly cared for by mountain owners is in good quality. You can tell who the owner is by looking at the wood." Thus, in order to utilise the facilities, skills, and knowledge of the Morie Sawmill, it is essential to provide a good level of local resources.

From the above, it can be concluded that three points played an important role in the creation of added value through local industry in the former Tomi village / Oh hamlet of Kagamino town, Okayama Prefecture: 1) an entity managing local resources with a long-term vision; 2) skills and knowledge in adding value to local resources; and 3) self-sufficiency in the region in terms of energy for added value creation.

Currently, Morie Sawmill has no successor and Sawayama is planning to close the sawmill. It is saddening to hear that the local resource utilisation system, which took more than 100 years to build, is in danger of disappearing. There are probably many similar cases in the mountainous regions of Japan. There is a need for re-evaluation of systems and economic actors such as Morie Sawmill, which created added value for local resources while utilising energy within the region, from the perspective of maintaining local communities.

## Chapter 4 The transformation of 'village festivals' in Oh hamlet

### 4-1. 'Village festivals' in Oh hamlet and their change

The diverse problems faced by mountainous areas include not only social and economic problems, but also those related to local culture. Even the 'village festivals', i.e. ritual events for the local deity (Shinto), which have long been a spiritual bond of the local people, are in danger of disappearing.

In Oh hamlet, there is a Kanda Shrine (which was renamed in the Meiji era (1868-1912) in accordance with the policy of 'one village, one shrine', and was joined with the previously existing Ooasa Shrine, Gosha Shrine and others), where all households in the hamlet are clan members, and various ritual events are held by the headperson (also called *Toya*) who rotates every year with the general representatives of clan members. Currently, there are four 'village festivals' held in Oh hamlet: the Rice Planting Festival, the Summer Festival, the Autumn Festival and the Shimotsuki Festival (sweet sake festival). In addition to the festivals, other religious events held in Oh hamlet as a whole include the *Hyakumanben* (bead spinning). Other festivals related to 'village festivals' include *Kamiage* and *Shimetate*. The former is a ceremony in which a priest gives a prayer of congratulation at the houses of the old headperson (three houses) after the Shimotsuki Festival to return the deity to heaven, while the latter is a ceremony in early April at the houses of the new headperson (three houses) where the same priest gives a prayer of congratulation to bring down the deity (welcome the deity into the headmen). Although both of these events are held at the house that serves as the headperson, rather than in the whole Oh hamlet, they are important ceremonies that support the religious worldview of the area.

During the Autumn Festival, held on 3<sup>rd</sup> November, Culture Day, after the ritual at Kanda Shrine, the portable shrines are carried by tractors to the various villages, instead of being carried by *koshimori* (portable shrine carriers / guards) as in the past (Fig. 4-1). When the portable shrines return to the shrine, the procession is cleaned up and a '*naora*' (a dinner of sushi, sashimi and catered hors d'oeuvres) is held in the shrine hall.



**Figure 4-1: Portable shrine procession in the Autumn Festival (3<sup>rd</sup> November, 2019)**

Photo by Hiroshi Takano

The 2019 Shimotsuki Festival was held on Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> November. Preparation work begins in the morning with men and women dividing into groups to prepare ceremonial sake vessels called *orikake-daru* (folded barrels), sardines, red rice and white rice as offerings to Kanda Shrine, Ooasa Shrine and Gosha Shrine respectively, or amazake and pickles for serving. The Shimotsuki Festival does not include a portable shrine procession, but instead includes a ceremony at Kanda Shrine, a divination ceremony (using a chest filled with white rice and chopsticks made from *kaya* to divine the crop for the coming year), and a ceremony to hand over the three shrines' head offices, followed by a *naorai* feast at the Life Improvement Centre (Fig. 4-2).



**Figure 4-2: Naorai feast at the Shimotsuki Festival (24<sup>th</sup> November, 2019)**

Photo by Hiroshi Takano



#### 4-2. Changes in 'village festivals' and the relationship between local people

Comparing these village festivals with the previous survey in the 1950s, there has been no change in the composition of festivals at Kanda Shrine, which contrasts with the reduction or disappearance of rituals for the *ko* or small shrines in the hamlet.

On the other hand, considerable changes can be seen in the composition and duration of the procession during the portable shrine procession and the organisation of the Shimotsuki Festival, both of which have been simplified and shortened. The *naorai* also began to be held at shrine halls and public places, rather than in the home of each headperson, and changes can also be seen in the content of the food.

As described above, the overall structure of the 'village festivals' in Oh hamlet has not changed over a period of approximately 65 years. However, if one looks at the content and format of each of the festivals, including the state of preparation, one can quickly recognise that considerable changes have taken place. Many of them have been simplified, but the fact is that these changes did not come by gradual erosion, but through discussions among the local people, mainly the *Ujiko* (shrine parishioner) general assembly, who decided on them.

The author (Takano) had the opportunity to attend an *Ujiko* general meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> January, 2020 at the Life Improvement Centre (jointly with the hamlet general meeting and the New Year meeting, attended by 21 people, one from each household), where various opinions were exchanged on the Kanda Shrine's festival events. For example, the summer festival had previously been held on 14<sup>th</sup> July, regardless of the day of the week, but many people, such as those who work, find it difficult to participate in the festival, so it was decided to hold the festival on a Sunday close to the same day from 2020 onwards. In addition, the previous year's (January 2019) *Ujiko* general meeting decided to eliminate the *naorai* for the Rice Planting Festival and Summer Festival with the aim of reducing the burden on the headperson, and this decision was implemented in 2019. However, some people argued that the *naorai* was part of the ritual and that its omission was not appropriate, and after serious discussion, it was decided at the *Ujiko* general meeting on that day that in 2020, beverages, etc. would be served after the festival, albeit in a simplified form. Of course, these changes will be implemented for the time being as a 'trial', and if there are any inconveniences, everyone will seek more suitable measures to renew the appearance of the village festival.

Thus, in Oh hamlet, there are active discussions among local residents about the nature of the festivities. The simplification of the village festivals may be seen as a sad thing in terms of the transmission of local culture, but in this area, the changes were chosen voluntarily by the local people in accordance with their own living conditions. It would be almost impossible to maintain the same old rituals in the same way as in the past, as can be

seen from the significant role played by the headperson, and the decision to simplify is also wisdom to sustain the 'village festivals' that they have passed on.

Furthermore, simplification has been promoted in the form of retaining the essential aspects of festival events and omitting those that have become redundant in modern times. For example, the eating and drinking scenes (*naorai* and portable shrine processions), which used to be excessive due to a lack of entertainment and different drinking environments in the old days, have been simplified in line with today's conditions. Hors d'oeuvres, for example, where it was acceptable to use outside services, were changed to reduce the burden on the headperson and family women who cooked the food. Contrary, the core rituals and festive events, such as those found at the Shimotsuki Festival, have generally retained their previous procedures and formality. Sardines, one of the offerings, are difficult to obtain in some years, but unlike the food at the *naorai*, they are perceived as a difficult part to change, and people show great resistance to changing to saury, which is easier to obtain. In view of this situation of decision to adopt or reject, it is not necessarily appropriate to describe the changes in village festivals in Oh hamlet simply as 'simplification'. Instead, it should be seen as a process of proactive optimisation and rationalisation by local people in line with the changing local society.

In Oh hamlet, a booklet entitled 'Kanda Shrine Ritual Outline', which describes the origin of Kanda Shrine and the significance, methods and procedures of each annual ritual event, was produced in 2009 and distributed to each household, led by an elderly person familiar with the history of the area. These booklets are valuable records that can serve as guidelines for the future execution of events, and can also be used to make decisions on 'optimisation' and 'rationalisation' by showing what is at the core of a particular ritual event. Similar to Oh hamlet, there are many areas in Japan with declining populations, falling birth rates and an ageing population that need to reconsider the nature of their 'village festivals'. The efforts made in Oh hamlet to discuss the future with local residents and to leave detailed explanations of shrines and their festivals may be a useful experiment for such communities.

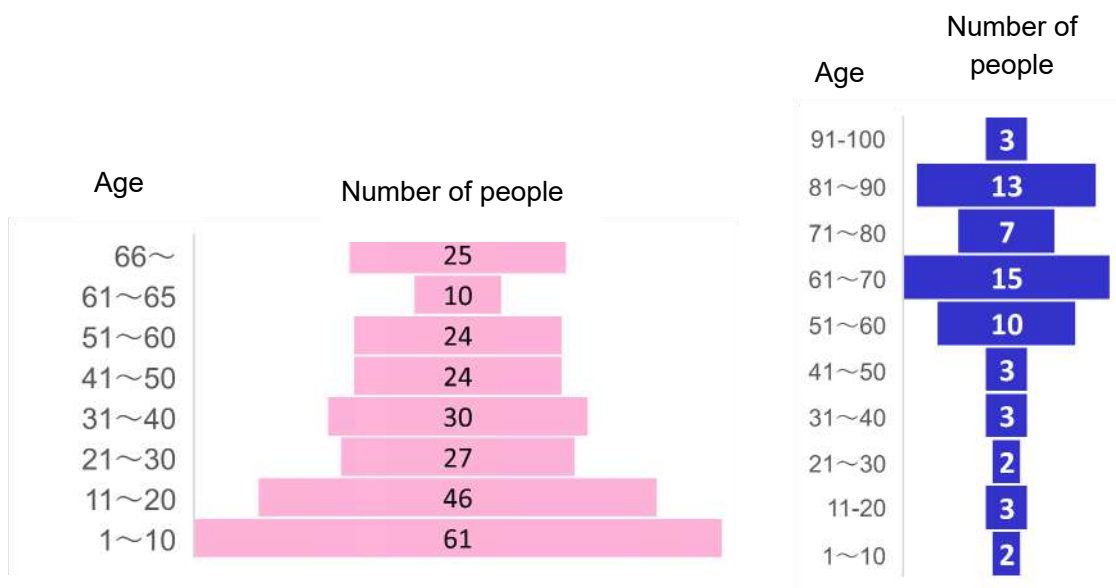
## Chapter 5 Transition of health care and issues in Oh hamlet

### 5-1. Health and elderly care challenges in Oh hamlet

The medical survey in the last Oh hamlet investigation was conducted in 1952. At that time, seven years after the war, the whole Japan was still in a state of confusion and public health was at a low level due to the spread of infectious diseases and venereal diseases, food shortages, and other reasons. It is assumed that Oh hamlet was no exception. In the previous survey, population composition, ocular hygiene, syphilis, oral hygiene, parasitic egg carriage and other genetic traits were investigated. Notably, in-depth surveys on trachoma ocularis (by type, timing and age), mass blood sampling on syphilis and parasite egg-bearing rates have been carried out. One of the main issues at the time was the response to acute and chronic infectious diseases, and it is evident that the surveys were conducted against this historical background. However, there are no records of surveys on tuberculosis, which was feared as a 'deadly disease' at the time.

Infant mortality and parasites, which were major issues at the time, were dramatically reduced through comprehensive measures such as the expansion of health services and improved sanitation. In addition, cerebrovascular disease, malignant neoplasms (cancer) and heart disease replaced tuberculosis, which had long been the leading cause of death, as the first three leading causes of death in 1958. From the 1980s onwards, measures to deal with the ageing of society became an urgent issue, and the Geriatric Health Act was enacted in 1982, followed by the Long-Term Care Insurance Act in 2000. However, there are concerns about the so-called '2025 problem', in which the so-called 'baby boomers' who were born after the war will be aged 75 or older and a quarter of the population will be 'latter-stage elderly' (over 75) of their lives. Currently, measures to combat this are being implemented in a hurry, such as reforming the medical and long-term care systems, building a comprehensive regional care system and addressing the labour shortage. However, there is little time left until 2025.

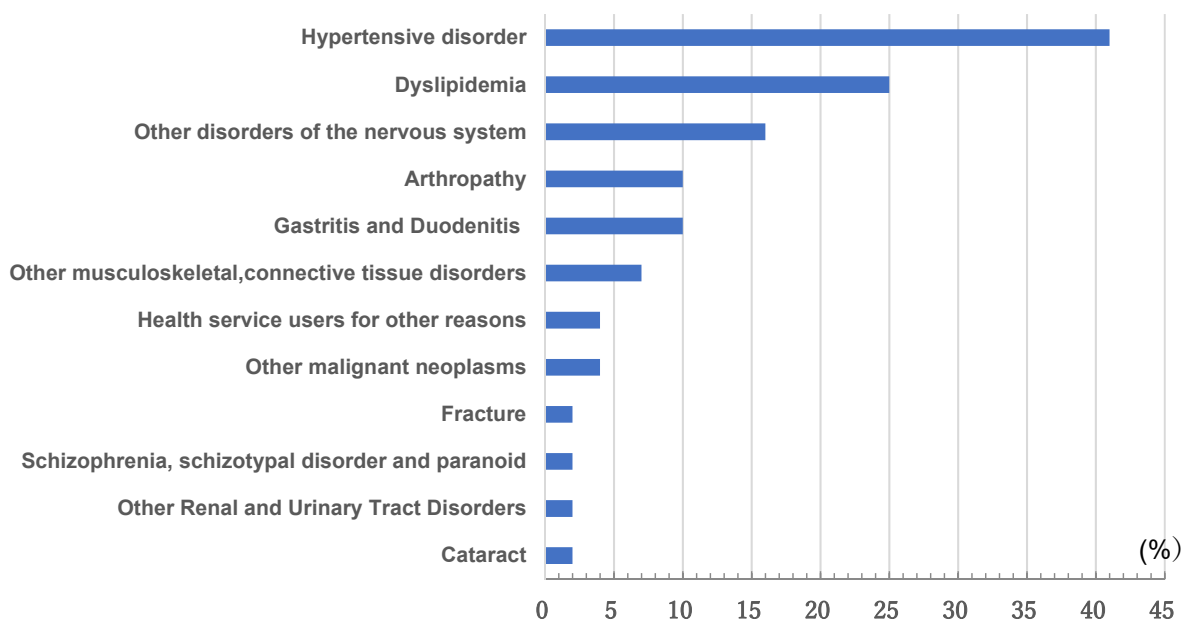
The population is also rapidly ageing in Oh hamlet, and whereas in 1952 the base of the population pyramid (aged 1-10) was 61, showing a stable 'Mount Fuji'-like shape, by 2019 the ageing rate had reached 54.1%, making the population structure more like a 'bolt' than a 'vase'-like shape, with an inverted triangle (Fig. 5-1).



**Figure 5-1: Population structure in Oh hamlet (left: 1952; right: 2019)**

From Oh hamlet population data

Looking at health and medical care in Oh hamlet in terms of diseases seen by the statistics of National Health Insurance insured patients, the most common disease seen was hypertensive disorder, followed by dyslipidaemia, other neurologic diseases, arthropathy, gastritis and duodenitis. Stroke and hypertension are the major health issues. Disorders to the lower limbs are also a problem when living in mountainous areas (Figure 5-2).



**Figure 5-2: Outpatient visits in Oh hamlet in Fiscal Year 2020 (National Health Insurance)**

## **Insured Persons)**

From Tomi area outpatient data

Since the post-war period, medical care in the Tomi area has been supported by local doctors and others in rural clinics. Currently, medical facilities used by residents of the greater area include the Kagamino Town National Health Insurance Hospital (hereafter referred to as Kagamino Town Hospital), medical facilities in Maniwa City and the Tomi Health Clinic. Hospitals are located in Kagamino Town and Tsuyama City, while the main hospital visits are to Maniwa or to the Tomi Health Clinic. Although a welfare bus service is available as a means of getting to the hospital, some elderly people are reportedly reluctant to go. While there are challenges in maintaining clinics and medical facilities, attempts are being made to introduce a system called 'Vital Link' to share data with multiple professions (currently out of operation). Group activities in the community, such as exercises, are also being implemented.

As for long-term elderly care services, 20 years have passed since the introduction of the long-term care insurance system, and the reluctance to accepting such services has diminished considerably. Currently, the Council of Social Welfare and other organisations provide muscle and brain training classes at the Kagamino Town Community Support Centre and day services (three times a week) at the Tomi Welfare Centre. It is also possible for people to receive support at home through the use of helpers, clinic visits, etc. However, there are limitations in providing sufficient services due to the limited number of caregivers and other factors. In Oh hamlet, among the five persons approved as requiring support or care under the long-term care insurance system, one is using home-based services and two are in institutional care, while the remaining two are not using any services. There is one group home in Tomi, but when care cannot continue at home, people often end up in facilities in other areas, such as Tsuyama or Maniwa.

One of the needs consulted by elderly people in the Tomi area (including Oh hamlet), which is subject to heavy snowfall, is to stay in facilities only during the winter months, when there is a lot of snow. However, there are no care homes or other facilities in Kagamino Town to meet their specific needs. Furthermore, in some cases they have no choice but to refer them to facilities in Tsuyama City or small multifunctional facilities for three months.

### **5-2. Health and care challenges and responses in an ageing society**

The standard of healthcare in Japan has improved dramatically due to improvements in the environment, diet and nutrition, advances in medical technology and the development of therapeutic drugs. As a result, life expectancy is now among the highest in the world and has

increased by nearly 20 years compared with 70 years ago. However, we can no longer be complacent about these results. Japan's ageing population is expected to continue and the '2025 problem' has become a pressing issue. The main factors contributing to the ageing of the population are 1) an increase in the population aged 65 and over due to a decline in age-group-specific mortality rates, and 2) a decrease in the number of young people due to the declining birth rate. There is particular concern about the increasing problems related to 1) healthcare, 2) social security, and 3) long-term care.

As the 'super-aged society' progresses, the population continues to flow out of settlements and depopulation is increasing in many parts of Japan. The decline and ageing of the population first become more pronounced in rural areas, where it manifests itself in the form of the collapse and threatened disappearance of local communities and livelihoods. Settlements where 50% of the population is over 65 years old are called 'marginal settlements' and are said to reach the limit of their sustainability in various aspects. However, the term 'marginal settlements' is now being replaced by 'settlements with severe basic conditions' or 'settlements that are difficult to maintain'. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the number of settlements in depopulated areas is reported to be 63,237, with a settlement population of 10,357,584 and an average population per settlement of approximately 164 people. The transformation of Oh hamlet population distribution over the last 70 years has been remarkable, with the ageing rate already reaching 54.1% in 2019. The various services we need for our daily lives are based on a certain population size. If the population falls below the required population size, it is said that the service industry will withdraw from the lifestyle-related services (retail, food and beverage, entertainment, medical services, etc.), leading to a possible decline in services in the future.

Through this survey revealed that in Oh hamlet, the following issues are being faced: 1) the downsizing or withdrawal of private sector shops selling goods and dispatching helpers to support home care; 2) the limits to the continuation of local government and public transport, health, medical and nursing care services due to the small or decreasing number of users; 3) difficulties in visiting hospitals and living due to the inability to drive; and 4) hesitation in using these services due to public and family reservations about seeing a doctor or using nursing care insurance.

At the same time, however, a picture emerged of local authorities, local communities and professional staff working hard to support the community by discussing and cooperating with each other in order to respond to these severe challenges. It was also revealed that, although the staff felt that welfare services had improved since the introduction of the Long-term Care Insurance system, they still perceived the lack of sharing of detailed information as a challenge. Population decline and ageing are difficult problems to solve, and now is the time to re-examine the nature of sustainable support systems for the elderly and to present

a vision for the future based on the actual situation.

As one of the countermeasures, it is expected that local governments will take the lead in establishing comprehensive community care, which provides support according to local conditions so that residents can lead their daily lives until the end of their lives in their own familiar neighbourhoods. In addition, although unfortunately not in operation at present, ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and AI (Artificial Intelligence) are being utilised, as seen in the multidisciplinary information sharing system in tie-up with private companies like Vital Link and the 'SOS Network' for searching for missing dementia patients. Those measures will be even more relevant for solving the problems faced by Oh hamlet, and will become increasingly necessary in the future.

This chapter has examined the transformations and meanings that the institutionalisation of 'health' and 'medical care' and the modernisation of Japanese society have brought to Oh hamlet. In particular, the introduction of the universal health insurance system, the Geriatric Health Care Act and the Long-term Care Insurance system as health and medical care systems were important and indispensable systems for the people to receive medical and long-term care services with peace of mind and brought great benefits to the lives and health of the residents of the area along with the modernisation of Japanese society. At the same time, however, it has become clear that in Oh hamlet, the decline in the population due to the outflow of population and the decline in the birth rate, as well as depopulation brought about by the arrival of a super-aged society, have become major barriers to life in the region. We are now facing the challenge of how to tackle these issues on a community-wide basis, and what each of us can do to help.

## **Chapter 6 The current situation in Oh hamlet and the former Tomi area - with a focus on the 'Mergers in the Heisei-era' and the regional management structure**

### **6-1. The impact of the mergers in the Heisei-era in the former Tomi village area and the Community Development Councils**

The most significant change in the external environment in the 2000s for the mountainous communities, including Oh hamlet, was the merger of local governments known as the 'Mergers in the Heisei-era'. The term refers to the nationwide movement of wide-area consolidation of municipalities that was promoted from the end of the 1990s to the early 2000s with the aim of establishing the financial basis of local governments and creating a platform for decentralisation. Financial incentives were granted at the preparatory and post-merger stages, resulting in 640 mergers since 1999 and a decrease in the number of municipalities from 3,232 (as at end-March 1999) to 1,730 (as at end-March 2010). While the Heisei merger has had significant financial benefits, as noted above, it has also had a negative impact on the periphery of the merged municipality.

Following the Heisei consolidation, Regional Management Organisations (RMOs) were established in various regions with the intention of supplementing and replacing municipalities that had become more extensive. RMOs are organisations that implement projects to support livelihood functions in depopulated areas which are established by local residents.

In the 2000s, Tomi Village had various merger possibilities, including consolidations within Tomata County, the greater Tsuyama area and with Maniwa City, resulting in the creation of the new town of Kagamino in 2005 by the four towns/villages of Kagamino, Tomi, Okutsu and Kamisaibara. As a result of administrative and financial reforms following the merger, some of which led to a decline in administrative services and an increased burden on residents, in the former Tomi Village area the number of staff decreased from 40 before the merger to 5 in 2019, although the Tomi Development Centre remained in place. Tomi Junior High School was merged in 2016 and the primary school is also set to be merged at the end of Fiscal Year 2022. JA (agricultural cooperative) branches in the Tomi area have also been discontinued, with only ATMs remaining. On the other hand, some residents feel that the number of tourists has increased since the merger, mainly due to improved transport access.

Since 2010, after the consolidation, 12 community development councils have been established in Kagamino Town. This was based on the Kagamino Town Future and Hope Fund project, a system whereby each community would draw up a five-year community



development activity plan, apply to the town and receive a subsidy, with the intention of shifting from a request-based to a proposal-based approach to community development. One Community Development Council exists in the former Tomi Village area, with a budget of approximately 6 million Japanese Yen (around 50,000 US Dollars) granted for each of the first (2010-2014) and second (2015-2019) phases. Although a variety of activities such as welfare, health, organising events and environmental beautification are carried out, it can be pointed out that the activities are fixed and the role of the council is subcontracted from the government. In addition, there are no opportunities for dialogue between the Kagamino Town Hall (main office) and the council, making it difficult to say that the ideal of resident-led community development based on a partnership with the administration has been realised.

## **6-2. Current challenges and future prospects**

In the above, the current situation in the former Tomi Village area, including Oh hamlet, was summarised under the theme of the Heisei merger and the regional management structure. In light of the survey results, we would like to point out two final points.

The first point is the change in the relationship between local authorities and residents following the downsizing of administrative functions in peripheral areas. In above, it was pointed out that the downsizing of the functions of the Development Centres, which are the regional centres of administration, is the most significant change since the merger, and that this has caused a dilution of communication between the residents and the administration. However, the change in the position of the Development Centres also reveals a qualitative change in the relationship between the municipality and the residents of the peripheral areas.

Immediately after the consolidation, the Development Centres were able to make a certain degree of decision-making on regional matters, and there were opportunities for information sharing and communication between the promotion centres, the main office and the Town council. However, as a result of administrative and financial reforms, the promotion centres are now simply a place for administrative procedures. In other words, the relationship between the municipality and the surrounding area is changing from a two-way to a one-way relationship. Previous studies have shown that the change in the relationship between local authorities and local communities from two-way to one-directional due to the Heisei merger not only leads to a loss of partnership between the local community and the administration, causing a loss of residents' sense of autonomy and a decrease in their willingness to cooperate with the administration, but also increases resource management costs and local consensus-building costs. It has been pointed out that this can lead to an increase in resource management costs and local consensus-building costs. Thus, the reduction of administrative

functions in peripheral areas may have a negative impact on municipal management in the medium to long term.

The second point is an assessment of the current situation of regional management organisations. Community management organisations in the former Tomi area have been established at the initiative of the administration, and their main members have been mobilised on a 'fill-in' basis and only serve as subcontractors to the administration. In the light of the principle of resident-led community development, this situation should be improved. Previous studies have reported on regional management organisations that, as a result of many years of efforts by local residents and support from the administration since the 1970s, have come to build relationships with the administration as equal partners through the functioning of regional autonomy by residents' organisations in a range of areas beyond the settlement. In light of this case study, the challenges for the Tomi region in the future will be to arouse residents' interest in broad-based regional autonomy, to build partnerships with districts and to provide support from the administration. However, it is also clear that the serious decline and ageing of the population is having a negative impact on the viability of the regional management organisation. In other words, it is highly likely that communities do not have the capacity to actively engage in new activities and are content to simply continue existing activities. Although the reluctant response of the local communities to the regional management structures is hardly desirable in terms of the ideal form of community self-governance, it may be a reasonable option in light of the harsh reality of the region and may be considered a rational response in a sense, given the lack of sufficient support from the government.

## **Chapter 7 The meaning of mountain villages and the future of Oh hamlet**

### **7-1. The role of mountain villages in the future**

As the world becomes increasingly uncertain about the future of food production due to climate change and other factors, the role of mountain villages, including Oh hamlet, and of rural communities more broadly, is likely to change. They are likely to have more significant role beyond cultural and emotional nostalgia, as a realistic 'security' for food, water resources and livelihoods, and as a 'public good' for society to ensure the sustainability.

The significance of the supply of resources such as food, water or timber is so clear that it no longer needs explaining, especially in the context of recent food and raw material price increases. If Japan cannot rely on food imports from other countries, improving food self-sufficiency is essential for the survival of its large, albeit shrinking, population. Although Japan relies heavily on large-scale and intensive agricultural producers such as agricultural

corporations, the role of small-scale farmers and community farmers is still significant, especially in mountainous areas where it is difficult to establish large-scale farming operations.

As it has already been said, the use of forests and rice paddies for water source recharge, disaster prevention and environmental conservation functions, as well as the use of the natural resources and culture of the region for tourism and exchange, also play an important role in society. As it can be seen in the Tokyo metropolitan area with its current population of over 35 million, the extreme concentration of the population in urban areas causes a great deal of stress in daily life. Then, there are not a small number of new farmers and migrants from the cities, as well as people seeking physical and mental well-being through living and interacting in farming and mountain villages away from urban areas, such as the forest therapy initiatives being conducted in the neighbouring Chizu Town in Tottori Prefecture.

There are significant costs involved in maintaining farming and fishing communities, including building and maintaining safety nets for livelihoods such as transport infrastructure, healthcare, welfare and education. There are also challenges in developing economically viable industries and attracting human resources with diverse skills. However, maintaining farming, forestry and fishing villages with these functions seems necessary for individuals and society as a whole to move closer to a form of well-being in which they are happier and more content in body and mind. Based on such a social consensus, it may be required in the future to protect and utilise farming and fishing villages as 'public goods'.

## **7-2. Future of Oh hamlet**

It goes without saying that the future of Oh hamlet will be left primarily to the will of the people who live and be engaged in the area, but some options seem to be apparent. Although the mountainous terrain of Oh hamlet is not conducive to large-scale farming, consolidation of farmland is already under way in the form of Farm Tomi, or leasing farmland to relatively younger farmers. Alternatively, in the neighbouring area of Hokubou, Maniwa City, the agricultural cooperative Kiyotou has converted rice paddies into fruit orchards and is running a café and selling fruit in shops and by mail order, jointly funded by local residents. It is hoped that these new initiatives will expand to include migrants and 'U-turners' (locals who came back from urban areas) in the future.

Furthermore, although forestry is currently maintained and managed in the mountains, if the owners change due to inheritance or other reasons in the future, it will not be easy for the owners, especially those who live outside the village, to maintain the forests.

While there are residents with sufficient knowledge and skills, it will be necessary to explore new forms of management, including ownership, afforestation and other maintenance management, together with the local forestry cooperative, the administration and local companies involved in forestry.

There is also an urgent need to create employment through the development of new regional industries such as tourism and renewable energy, which is expected to bring new residents into the region. It is also essential to maintain safety nets for daily life, such as medical care, welfare and education, so that residents can live independently and with dignity to the end of their lives, especially in the ageing of the population. It will be necessary to consider ways to support residents with new services and communication using communications and transport infrastructure, mobility and IT.

## Reflection

Despite the fact that the Hashimoto Foundation kindly extended the survey period twice, the survey team was unable to carry out all the survey activities originally planned, partly because the outbreak of the new coronavirus did not end during the period.

However, we would like to express our gratitude to the people of Oh hamlet, the Kagamino Town and all those involved in the region for their cooperation in the survey. We would also like to thank the researchers and students of Okayama University who were in charge of the actual survey under these severe constraints, as well as the administrative staff who supported them. I also cannot thank President Hashimoto and staff of the Hashimoto Foundation who warmly watched over and supported us while the survey progressed.

We also learnt a lot from the people in Oh hamlet through our research and walking around the area. In particular, we spoke to Mr. Toshifumi Morie, Mr. Yoshinobu Namba and Mr. Masuhisa Daichou many times and learnt a lot about the area. It is an unforgettable memory of Mr. Daichou taking time out from the COVID epidemic to show us around the mountains with our students and talk to us about the forestry industry in the past. Each of us involved in the research felt the knowledge, wisdom and thoughts of each person we spoke to about the region, and I think we were given the opportunity to think anew about what constitutes 'happiness' for people.

Among them, meeting Ms. Hiroko Morie (née Fukada), who graduated from Okayama University, was posted as a teacher at the Tomi Elementary School Koki Branch School in Oh hamlet and married there, was a reminder of the deep connection between Okayama University and Oh hamlet since the survey 70 years ago. The branch school was a designated research school of the Okayama University Primary School for Education in remote areas, and she took up her post after visiting Oh hamlet during her school days, where she worked as a teacher for 40 years. At that time, as part of her educational activities, the teacher would sometimes bathe the school children. Currently, she lives in Oh hamlet with her husband Toshifumi (a researcher of local history and culture and a key collaborator in this study), her son and his wife and grandchildren. She told the student interviewed that she wanted to live in the area until the end of his life as much as possible and that he hoped that this research by Okayama University would be utilised so that the area could take measures to bring people back again (Figure 8-1).



**Figure 8-1: Hiroko Morie talking to the student**

How much we have lived up to the expectations of Ms. Morie and the other local residents is a matter of great regret. However, we have been supported by the passion and labour of our predecessors 70 years ago and the kindness of the local people, and we have been given the opportunity to gain valuable knowledge, which is rare in academic circles, through 'fixed-point observation' of a single area over a period of 70 years. We hope to make use of this in our future efforts and research to achieve the SDGs at Okayama University, as well as in our advocacy activities to realise the 'well-being' of the communities and its people. Once again, we would like to thank everyone involved in this survey as our final reflection.

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Report of Kagamino Town (former Tomi Village) Oh Hamlet Reinvestigation Project

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The views are authors only and do not represent Okayama University.

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