

# SMALL GOOD THINGS



Learning from the traditional Kito way of life

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A “Kito” village is located in the deep mountain area of Shikoku, in Tokushima, Japan. It takes 12 hours drive from Tokyo. People in “Kito” had protested against the huge dam construction plan by the government in order to protect their beautiful river flowing through the village and their lives. After 30 years of protesting, the village finally saved the water and their lives and could be left alone. They are proud of their beautiful river that they stood for, and love their harmonized lives between people and nature, which are full of wisdom and love.



## Prologue

In the morning, and this is how a day starts - おなごし(onagoshi)<sup>1</sup> wakes up while it is still dark and lights a fire in 釜戸kamado<sup>2</sup> . Almost all of the 飯(meshi)<sup>3</sup> that get cooked on kamado are of wheat and barnyard grass. 'Onagoshi's morning is busy. As well as preparing for the food for the family, for the whole day, when there is 山仕事(yamashigoto)<sup>4</sup> she would have to make lunch as well. Men leave for work in the 山(yama)<sup>5</sup>, having packed their メンパ(menpa)<sup>6</sup> which has rice squeezed in it. After walking for as long as half a day, they finally arrive in the work field. Firstly they would make a fire and care for their tools, and start working according to one's own leadership. Due to the hard labor that involves danger, lunch box that was filled with two meals worth disappears before one realizes. Apart from 米(kome)rice, 雑穀(zakkoku)<sup>7</sup> , いらこ(iriko)<sup>8</sup> , 梅干し(umeboshi)<sup>9</sup> and 味噌(miso)<sup>10</sup> , other things are readily available in the field.

When it is the busy season with both planting and harvesting in the mountain fields, 'onagoshi' and children, help as well. They would make a simple shack in the mountain to stay as a family. When it is for a longer stay, they would not come home for many days. Of course there is no electricity nor water pipe. But they never thought of it as a hardship; rather, "we looked forward to going to the mountains with our parents", they say.

Life in the mountain has changed completely since the period of high growth. Lives of the people which had been supported by the mountain have now been "modernized", agricultural forestry mechanized while efficiency became most important - people have drifted to the cities and were not aware that they are relying on foreign countries for not only timber but also for food. Mountains in Japan, however, still have enough "affluence" to nurture not only the people of the mountains itself but the people in the cities as well.

Today, only じいとばあ(Ji and Ba)<sup>11</sup> are left in the mountain. This is the last time chance to find out and learn from them directly the “affluence” of the mountain – place that can grow woods, produce clear and pure water, the place where it can be the very source of one’s food of their lives. Even today, Ji and Ba chop firewood, build a shack and pile up stone wall, as if it is completely normal. Energy, electricity, housing and, food as well, were all at one’s own effort and done by themselves. The effect of “modernization” to the environment and human beings makes one wonder what it is that one could learn from the lives of Ji and Ba of the Kito mountain.



*Persimmon hanging outside being sun-dried*

- 1 おなごし(onagoshi) : a term used to refer to women, usually a mother or other female member of a house hold
- 2 釜戸(kamado) : a traditional Japanese cooking stove made out of mud and bricks - to use it one would use firewood
- 3 飯(meshi) : rice or food
- 4 山仕事(yamashigoto) : a type of work in the mountain, such as farming and planting trees. The term can also be used to mean a type of work such as chopping off trees in like in the olden days. The term can carry different meanings as the work in the mountain has changed accordingly to the generation.
- 5 山(yama) : a term that is used to mean ‘mountain’ and ‘villages’
- 6 メンパ(menpa) : wooden lunch box
- 7 雑穀(zakkoku) : meaning miscellamcous cereals
- 8 いりこ(iriko) : sun dried small fish, great source of calcium
- 9 梅干し(umeboshi) : sun-dried plums
- 10 味噌(miso) : bean paste
- 11 じいとばあ(Ji and Ba) : Ji means elder men while Ba means elder women living in the mountain of Kito

### Straw sandals : あしなか (Ashinaka)

“When I was a child, it was my job to carry firewood on my back from the mountain to my house. It was such a painful experience; wearing only ‘ashinaka’, the heavy weight of the firewood encroached into my shoulder and bloodstained my bare feet”, Ji says. ‘Ashinaka’ is a half the foot length size of Japanese straw sandals, which Ji and Ba in this village used to wear on their feet from their childhood until the end of World War II. When they turned ten years old, they made ‘ashinaka’ by themselves. That is why although good seventy years have passed, they can still remember how to make it. As the rice straws get twined in Ji’s hands; forming itself into one 縄(nawa)<sup>1</sup> which then gets hooked on to his toe as he knits straw into it. He would use all parts of his body that can be used; hands, fingers, legs and mouth - and forcefully, make it tight. Ji says as he recalls, “I made these thinking how I could make it more strong and comfortable to wear.”



*Girl learning how to make “ashinaka” from Ji*

This is about managing energy by oneself; making what to wear for our feet ourselves, using things that are accessible to us (not producing and creating waste) - these are perhaps all unbelievable things for people like us who have grown up in the period over-loaded with man-made things. Today, even if a child gives up half way through making 'ashinaka' and says, "This is too hard, I won't do this anymore", for children today they have excellent walking or sports shoes to wear to go to school the next day. As I hear words from Ji of the village over and over, I try to imagine how deeply nature and humans have been connected and co-existed with each other. And I try and move my hands and feet to make one 'ashinaka' like they explain talking of their times. This is indeed very hard, but at the same time a very fresh and exciting work to do.

Finally as Ji pulled two 'nawa' smoothly, I could see 'ashinaka' just having been made like a magic. Ji's face that was looking difficult talking about tough and painful memories now softened with a smile.

1 縄(nawa) : Japanese thick rope made by hand, out of straw and hemp



*Making "ashinaka"*