

Thatching Roofs and Yui

The thatched roofs of gassho-style houses get worn down by the elements and must be replaced at regular intervals, usually once every 20 to 30 years. In Shirakawa-go, thatching has traditionally been a cooperative effort that can involve up to 200 villagers at a time. The spirit of such cooperation, in which strict reciprocity is assumed, is referred to as yui. The owner of a house first calls upon his immediate neighbors, who are part of the same residents' group (kumi). If the house is small, the thatching can be accomplished by a single kumi, while help from other parts of the village is required for larger buildings.

Before the age of plastic sheets, a roof had to be thatched in a single day, and most re-thatching projects still follow this schedule. The family of the house gathers before dawn to remove the old thatch and prepare the roof for the arrival of the yui participants, who are accorded different roles depending on their skills and experience. The most senior usually supervises the work, while young villagers are tasked with handing bundles of grass to the thatchers on the roof or cleaning up after them. Members of the house owner's family serve refreshments during the day, and together with other villagers prepare a feast called naorai for all participants to partake of once the roof has been thatched.

The contributions of each yui participant, from work performed and thatching materials arranged to the number of sake bottles provided for the feast, are recorded in a booklet called a yui-cho. Such record-keeping helps ensure fairness and reciprocity, which are two of the key values of the yui tradition. The oldest yui-cho still in existence is from 1792, proving that the thatching of roofs has been a cooperative undertaking in Shirakawa-go for more than two centuries. Though re-roofing is nowadays usually carried out by professionals, villagers still get together at least once a year, usually in spring or autumn, to thatch a roof in the spirit of yui. This is done to make sure that the techniques involved are passed on to the next generation.