

## **Extended Families**

The economic and social history of Shirakawa-go is largely the history of how local residents have adapted to the lack of arable land at their disposal. In parts of the area, especially in the north and the south, the scarcity of farmland meant that entire extended families often lived under the same roof, cultivating the same fields, instead of having children other than the heir (usually the oldest son) move out to start their own families, as was customary elsewhere. The practice of extended families sharing a house was systematized and developed further from the mid-Edo period (1603–1867) into the Meiji era (1868–1912), when the people of Shirakawa-go made sericulture (silkworm raising) their primary means of subsistence. Because sericulture is labor-intensive, the heads of families sought to keep their children and grandchildren in the home to work.

A typical extended family would be led by the head of the household, who would live together with his wife, their heir and his family, and their other children. Daughters would remain in the house after marriage and be visited regularly by their husbands, as would sons without inheritance rights, who in turn would visit their wives elsewhere in the village. This system was built on necessity rather than compulsion, and included a measure of individual freedom. On one day each week, nuclear families within the extended family were allowed time off from their regular duties. On such days, the husband, wife, and their children could spend time together or work a small field designated for them. Any crops they produced would be purchased by the head of the household, resulting in private income for the nuclear family.

In the southern Miboro settlement, up to 48 members of the Toyama family lived together at one point during the Meiji era. Their residence, the Toyama House, is now a folk museum where visitors can learn more about the history of Shirakawa-go and the traditional communal lifestyle of the villagers, which had largely disappeared by the 1930s, when improvements in sericulture technology and techniques reduced the need for familial labor.