

The Extended Families of Shirakawa

The Toyama family was the largest and most influential in southern Shirakawa in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the turn of the twentieth century, some 45 members of the family lived together here in the Toyama House, built around 1850. This form of communal lifestyle was common in what is now the southern and northern parts of Shirakawa Village, where the scarcity of farmland meant that entire extended families often continued living under the same roof, cultivating the same fields, instead of having children other than the heir (usually the oldest son) moving out to start their own families. The practice of extended families living together was institutionalized and developed further during 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.