

Life in an Extended Family

Unlike what the sensationalist writings of the late 1800s described, the system of extended families was built on necessity rather than compulsion and included a measure of individual freedom. On one day each week (or once every five days, as in the Toyama family), nuclear families within the large 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. On the other hand, the nuclear family had to procure and cook its own food on off days, since the household did not provide them with meals. The Toyama family kept a record of the crops purchased by the head of the family under this system. These documents cover the period from 1851 to 1891 and show that all adults in the family, except the head of the household, engaged in such private farming, growing barnyard millet, soybeans, rice, chestnuts, buckwheat, mulberry leaves, and more.