

***Yui* and the Village Community**

The thatched roofs of *gassho*-style houses gradually wear down and must be replaced once every 20 to 30 years. In Shirakawa-go, thatching has traditionally been a cooperative effort that can involve up to 200 villagers. The spirit of such cooperation, in which strict reciprocity is assumed, is referred to as *yui*.

Yui participants are accorded different roles depending on their skills and experience. The most senior usually supervises the work, while younger 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 locally called *naorai* for all participants once the roof has been thatched.

The contributions of each 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 roof thatching has been a cooperative undertaking in Shirakawa-go for more than two centuries.

The practice of *yui* grew out of the traditional social circumstances of the villages in the Sho River valley. For centuries, these remote villages were largely closed communities, and residents rarely interacted with outsiders. Villagers shared a strong sense of belonging, a commitment to looking out for each other, and an understanding that the village and its traditions were theirs to protect and uphold.

Until recently, moving away from one's village was practically unheard of, as was moving into a village from outside the community. This was in part due to a local custom that discouraged selling, buying, or renting land, which was something one inherited and was expected to pass on to the next generation. This social structure enabled the development of reciprocal ties that spanned generations. Such ties underpinned not only *yui* but also the organizing of events such as weddings and funerals that involved the entire village.

Even now, the residents of Shirakawa-go 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 the techniques involved are passed onto the next generation. Local guidelines that prohibit the sale,

renting, and demolishing of *gassho*-style houses are another way in which centuries-old village traditions are being upheld.