

## Possibilities of Photographs as Material for Landscape Analysis

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### 1. Introduction

Landscapes are traces of human activity inscribed on the Earth. Landscapes are shaped even today by activities of individuals and societies, and therefore continue to change. "Landscape" is one of the keywords in Kanagawa University's 21<sup>st</sup> Century COE Program. By analyzing landscapes, we have been trying to learn how people live, act and think, and what they try to accomplish. Among the most important reference materials in the study have been the so-called the Shibusawa Films, which are owned by Kanagawa University's Institute for the Study of Japanese Folk Culture. The films are a collection of photos and films of people's lives and folklore in and outside Japan, taken by Keizō Shibusawa and his staffs between 1935 and 1944. The Shibusawa Films deal with various aspects of people's lives, culture and climate, including the people themselves, animals, tools, houses, communities, farmland, vegetation, topography and villagers' behavior including gestures. The photos give us a glimpse of old communities and their folklore. This report explores the possibilities of landscape analysis using photographic materials, based on the Shibusawa Films and photos taken by the author as a step toward studying the Shibusawa Films.

### 2. Photography as Records and Materials

Today, probably no geographers, folklorists or anthropologists leave the sites of their field studies without taking pictures. When they return and review their photos to wrap up their studies, they often rediscover the sites. Photographs are also effective in helping other people understand the sites by showing concrete images. Photographs are often used for geographic, folkloristic and anthropologic research papers. Many books have been published with photographs to depict what communities are like. In such cases, photographs have two significant functions. One is their function as records that capture a site on to a piece of paper, so that memories of it can be reconstructed and presented to others. The other is their function as materials that capture a concrete target so that the landscape can be analyzed. The landscape within the photograph has been chosen to accentuate the intentions of the photographer, and it functions as explanatory material for analysis by both the taker and the viewers of the photograph. In other words, an analysis of such photographs offers objective events and meanings, so that the photograph is relevant as material. For example, Photo 1, one of the Shibusawa Films, shows the seashore of Sumiyo Village on Amami Ōshima Island. Not only mangroves but also utility poles and electrical wires can be seen in the photograph. In the early Showa Era, which started in 1926, even this remote island had electricity. In a way, the photograph depicts an innovation revolution in the region. As such, photographs can be convenient materials that focus on the different aspects of a location.

### 3. Some Issues when Treating Photographic Materials

How to treat and analyze photographs taken by others remains an issue. As photographs are products of very subjective behavior, how should they be treated as reference materials, especially if they have been taken by

people other than those doing the analysis? On this point, Satoru Kikuchi (2000) points out the potential danger in analyzing photographs, taking as an example a photograph found in July 1951 showing an *aenokoto* ceremony of the Nomoto family in Yanagida Village, Fugeshi District, Ishikawa Prefecture. The photo gives evidence that the ceremony took place in front of military personnel during World War II when the media was strictly controlled, and that the person who presided over the ceremony was well acquainted with Shintō ceremonies, which is obvious from the written prayers and meal trays shown in the photograph. Therefore, the photograph reveals that this *aenokoto* ceremony was strongly influenced by Shintō, and is clearly different from its original form as an agricultural ceremony. When analyzing photographs, it is critical to avoid such simple pitfalls of relying only on what is apparent on the photographs, and to discern the true meaning behind each image.

#### 4. Analyzing Landscapes in Photographs

How, then, should photographs be used for landscape analysis? According to Keiichi Yano (2003), photographs are most proactively used in research activities in the field of geography, as a means of both recording and expression. Yano refers to works by Minoru Ishii (1988) and Kaoru Tanaka (1935) to explain the trends in using photographs to create topographic documents. He takes particular note of the way photographs are shot and used in Tanaka's *Geoscientific Photography*, in which a number of photographs of the entire area that show road, water and farming systems, as well as types of residential buildings, vocations, and the appearance of the people, work together as a group of photographs of the entire village to depict the entirety of the region. Yano also borrows Tanaka's words in explaining the use of photographs, saying "academic creativity" is at work here to "grasp the meaning of geographic landscapes correctly, and to make adequate choices in the point from which observations are made and records are taken," and that this is a form of expression is quite different from "dramatic direction."

Such uses of photography may in fact indicate pertinent approaches for analyzing photographs. If in fact the "academic creativity" mentioned by Tanaka and Yano is applied to how the photographs are taken, and if there is a certain intention in how the components of this landscape are captured, landscapes can be analyzed and interpreted for their implications by applying such viewpoints to photographs taken by those other than the ones who analyze them. That is, particular attention should be paid to several noticeable components of the landscape, and understanding should then deepen on the formation of the landscape "that expands to outside the photograph." All components of the landscape within the picture should be scrutinized (at this point, components that were "accidentally incorporated" into the photograph regardless of the intention of the photographer would also be important (Fujinaga et al : 2004)), and, above all, the ability to figure out and interpret the significance of their combinations and how they relate to each other is required of the person who analyzes. If, for example, we take the landscape of a village, we must be able to penetrate into the livelihood of its people and their will from the glimpses available in order to analyze this landscape, as Hiromi Taguchi (2006) describes: "It is important to understand the relationship between visibly discernible objects –from items found casually placed around the houses such as spades and harrows, pails and barrels, strainers and baskets, to roof tiles, roof angles, how the gardens are laid out, allotment of land - and people's lives as one system." In addition, if we are to look into how landscapes in the Shibusawa Films changed over time, the social and economic environment and the system of the times that surround the people must also be considered.

Photo 2, another of the Shibusawa Films, shows a burial at sea that took place on a beach in Nase City, now

Amami City, on Amami Ōshima Island. Obviously, burial at sea is what the photographer intended to depict. However, one wouldn't know that without being familiar with the customs and culture of the region at the time. Men and women of all ages, in various forms of dress, can be seen gathered at the ceremony. In the background, houses and a chimney are visible. There are fishing boats and oars in the water, and large cultivated plots on a hill. In the foreground, stone steps can be seen. The picture contains many valuable elements that demand to be scrutinized and related to other elements in and out of the photograph, based on current knowledge of people's lives at the time, to obtain a full understanding of the overall picture of the region. The picture raises various questions: What was grown in the plots? How were the plots zoned? How did people grow crops? If they grew commercial crops, where were those crops shipped? Were the people who gathered for the ceremony engaged in farming or fishing? Looking for the unseen functions within a photograph with such questions in mind can expand its possibilities as material for landscape analysis.

#### <References>

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#### <Photos>

**Photo 1** Sumiyō Village in Amami Ōshima Island (No. SA580)

**Photo 2** Beach in Nase City in Amami Ōshima Island (No. SA575)