Interviewee: Ikumo san

Date and time: 6 March 2019, 2pm

Q: Interviewer A: Interviewee

Q: When did she start farming?

A: Maybe 7 years ago, this year is the 7th year…she is not sure… She came to this place 7 years ago, so this is the 7th year for farming.

Q: What did she do before?

A: She was working in Osaka, she was born in Osaka. Because her husband came to this region as a member to revitalize the community, then he came to this region and she followed him to come here.

Q: Why did she want to start farming?

A: The elderly around here just grow their own food and be self-sufficient, this is so normal for them, so naturally they do it. When she moved here, those elderly and neighbours all do the farming stuffs for their food, like the rice and vegetables, they just grow what they eat as a normal thing. So she thought she should do the same thing, as long as she decided to live in this region, she wanted to do the same thing as her neighbour, maybe that’s the normal thing to live here. Another reason is that she lost her income as moving from Tokyo to here, she just quitted the job, she wasn’t sure how she can get the income. When they started farming in this countryside, the government actually has the system to help those new farmers to become a farmer, so they give a subsidy of 115,000 Yen per year to new farmers for two years. This is one of the reasons why she started.

Q: Is it just for rice farming?

A: It could be anything, if you become a new farmer. It’s complicated paperwork, she has to do the paperwork for five years, even though she is just taking the money for 2 years, she has to report the follow-up things afterwards. Maybe this is because it is the government money, so they want to make sure that you are still a farmer afterwards. If not, they will take back the money. So, it is serious and complicated, it is an annoying system but still is helpful.

Q: For the food you grow, is it just for self-consumption now?

A: She sells some of the rice and veggies too. For the system, she needed someone to be her mentor, but the agricultural cooperative of this village could be her mentor, it depends on what she grows in the system.

Q: The mentor does not have to be a person; it can be an association as well?

A: Yes.

Q: Her mentor is an association, so she has more freedom in choosing what she wants to grow?

A: Yes, a lot of freedom.

Q: How would she characterize her farming practices?

A: No chemicals, no fertilization. For the rice, she sundried it, natural drying. Her rice terraces, the spring water comes from the mountain, she does not control the water, just rainwater and mountain spring water.

Q: She just transplants and weeds, but not controlling the water?

A: No. I helped her with weeding last summer by hands. She can use the tool in the beginning of the season, but afterwards she cannot use that anymore, she has to weed by hands. Because she doesn’t control the water, it depends on the rainfall, sometimes it’s easier, sometimes it’s so hard to walk through.

Q: Why she chose to farm in this way?

A: She doesn’t like the chemicals in the first place, for fertilization, she doesn’t know when to do it. She doesn’t want to study something new, to fertilize the land. Even though there is no fertilization, the rice is still good, there is no need to fertilize the soil, so she doesn’t do it. This makes the rice taste differently every year, she likes it, that’s the natural taste from the nature. It is like wine, she thinks in that way.

Q: Where did she learn farming?

A: When she was twenty, she was planning her life, she thought that maybe she wanted to do farming after retirement, like after 60 something, that was a blurred plan for her life. She started to learn farming and went to the big lettuce farm, she went to learn how to grow vegetables and how the big farm runs the farm and the process of how they take care of the crops. It was shocking because the business was big, for the veggies for self-consumption, they did not use the same amount of fertilization, it was shocking to her because it is different from how they treat the product and their own food. She learnt those kind of things in her twenties, this is how she started.

Q: What about rice farming?

A: She learnt it after she moved here 7 years ago.

Q: Why did they want to move to this region?

A: They are crazy about skiing, that’s why you chose to move to the Snow Country, countryside that has the snow. This area is close to Tokyo, their friends can come to enjoy the skiing too, that’s the reason why they chose to live in this region. The government has the system to hire young people to revitalize rural community, his husband got paid for the job. So it is a very simple reason that they came here. The love the snow and skiing, so they want to live in the Snow Country.

Q: Do you face any challenges in your farming?

A: It’s not related to challenges. Because she just started farming, people think that it is normal that she did not do it well, for example, having a lot of weeds is normal. The rice terraces she is working on is isolated from other places, they gave the land to her because people do not care how she does it. People just didn’t see whether she weeded or not. The rice terraces are not convenient to the locals because machine is not accessible and the irrigation system is not well set up. For the villagers and for people who do mainstream farming, it is not a good place. Her needs match well with what people do not need. She does not have normal problems that alternative farmers have, like to be complained by villagers for having a lot of weeds, so that was lucky for her.

Q: Are there any positive experiences?

A: She becomes like a Buddha because she is so isolated from people and the village, she spent time by herself a lot in the mountain, so there is a lot of thinking going, mentally it is like doing meditation. She couldn’t identify what she likes but she likes the mentality and situation, the isolation and being alone.

Q: Are there examples on what she would meditate on?

A: (she is very excited) She has been thinking that there is nothing that she is good at, no skills…there is nothing, she had been thinking about herself in this way. But after she started farming, she can go to Tokyo, to the middle of the city and ask people if there is anyone that could do rice farming. She has the complete confidence that she can say yes, ‘I can do it!’. That’s the self-confidence she gained from farming. Before that, she had been feeling that she is nothing, now she has some skills inside her and she can grow.

(Ikumo san asking about the location of the artworks)

A: She is afraid of this artwork (human re-entering nature), the face is scary. Why this face? It could be smiling, but it is standing there. She doesn’t understand the meaning of the work, but she is afraid of the face of this person in nature. She is not really interested in those art, so she never thought of anything about them. Maybe she has seen those art pieces, she feels so awkward of putting artificial things in nature. She doesn’t like the idea; she feels so unnatural in that way. She doesn’t get anything about them, she loves the nature more than artificial things.

Q: Maybe she can share her thoughts about the Matsuri if she doesn’t like artificial things? It’s more of a cultural event.

A: Those ceremonies with fire, all the traditional events, that maybe seem like art for foreigners, she thinks that that has meanings in their cultural background so she can understand them.

Q: How does she see those rituals?

A: From those cultural events, she doesn’t know if she likes or dislikes them or not, she just accepts those cultural events. She could accept them because it has meanings from the past, she just accepts the ideas, but for those artificial things, they are just so awkward for her. So she doesn’t understand any of this part.

Q: What about rice terraces, they are artificial thing in nature as well.

A: Rice terraces are living in nature, it is changing, it looks like part of nature, it is not the same as those artificial art piece.

Q: That’s interesting. To me artwork is also changing with the view and the surrounding environment, the work is emerged with changing environment. I would like to ask more about her view about the past. She just mentioned that the cultural events are meaningful because they are from the past…they have meanings from the past, so how….

T: People are following the traditions from the past, for them those events have meanings, like praying for harvest.

Q: So she just accepted the idea because they are from the past?

A: (thinking about it hard) Hmm…she thinks that to follow those traditional events, traditional rules and traditional life they have here…that’s to respect the life here, that makes her life to live in, following traditional things and respecting the lifestyle here. She is following the local rules and local habits from the past, just like the locals are following their lifestyle from the past. She is following the local tradition and local people to respect the life here, that’s why she does. For her, this is what she is doing. She mentioned that she started growing rice and veggies because those neighbours and elderly just do it in this way, it is really important for her to follow the kind of life they have had for long time, that means to live in this local region.

Q: Does it mean she is different from what Abe san told us?

T: Yes, she wanted to be more … like locals, that’s her way to respect and living in this way.

Q: How does she feel about following the locals? She is happy with it? Is it a normal process for her to live in this way?

A: It is her 7th year in farming, she got some regular customers to buy her rice, those customers actually feel some of her spirit of doing rice farming here. So part of her thinks that what she does make this satoyama landscape sustain, it is one of her missions through farming and keeping the rice terraces. She doesn’t think about it all the time, but in her spirit there are those thoughts in her mind and those customers remind her of those spirits a lot. They encourage her that what she does is food for the world and herself, so that’s kind of a motivation to her farming. Maybe the life here is better for her than living in the city, she likes the life here more than living in the city. That’s her life.

Q: She feels that she is doing something worthy?

T: Yes, she is relating to what she mentioned about feeling that she was nothing in the city before, I think this is the meaning of her life here.

Q: Is that also why she doesn’t like to have those artworks on the field because she likes the traditional part of the locals, and the Satoyama?

T: I think she just accepts those events, she doesn’t feel anything about it, she accepts it because they are something meaningful to them and they have been doing it for a long time, that’s the part that she follows. Because they think that it is meaningful, this kind of things have meanings to their life, so she understands it. But for the artworks, they have no cultural background.

Q: It is not like she doesn’t like the artwork, it’s just that she doesn’t understand it and she feels awkward of having them in nature?

T: Yes.

Q: She feels that it is one of her missions to preserve the landscape, but not the traditions?

T: I think she is more like…she wanted to assimilate with the locals, that makes her as a part of the locals, maybe to conserve this region and the nature. By listening to her story, I feel like she is more…she is the person who wants to be in the community, she respects that traditions that have meanings to villagers.

Q: Okay, I will ask you about it later. She mentioned that her customers can feel her spirit, is it from their feedbacks?

A: Her customers… it is a basic idea that she does not use chemicals and fertilization, for the customers, they like the idea but there are also alternative farmers who do alternative farming in a strict way, like not using any machinery, but her customers choose her because she is involved in this farming association in the village. maybe she does not like the idea of using chemicals in the shootings of rice, she planted those shootings. She doesn’t like the idea of using any chemicals, but if she has to be involved in the farming association of this village, she kind of has to accept what she doesn’t like, that means she is involved in this village association, that is like a contribution to the locals. Her customers like the idea of … even though she has to accept a bit of things that she doesn’t like, she is contributing to the villagers and the local community, so she accepted it.

Q: She is still involved in the village association now, even after the program? And they will use chemicals?

T: Yes. They prepare the shootings collectively, and they would use chemicals, she cannot avoid it, but that’s the cooperation. Without them, she will be ditched and complained by the community. To merge in the community and to be supported by the association, she has to accept the part that she doesn’t agree with. It’s really important to live in this village peacefully and happily, those parts … some farmers just follow strictly what they wanted to do, without any chemicals or whatever, but that might not be helpful to the community herself. Maybe to the environment it is good, but in local community, they might not be doing well because of following one’s self strictly. That’s her point and her customers… being involved in the farming association is really important to young farmers like her, it is really helpful for the villagers too, so she respects the community cooperation.

Q: She is involved in the association because of the subsidization program she just told me? Or she wants to be involved in the association no matter whether there is the program?

A: The association is made by the people here, renting the land or farming around means that she is helping the villagers. All the members in farming association is mostly elderly, it is kind of like helping them to continue their farming too because they are growing the seedlings all together, it makes the elders easier to farm because they work in a cooperative way. Being able to help the association, those elderly respect her too, to live in the village happily, it is really important to take the role in the village association, that’s why she does it.

A: She enjoys working in the village association, but she also enjoys working on her isolated land?

T: yes, but it is not like she didn’t weed, she still weeded but she didn’t make it as clean as the villagers because she did not use chemicals. I think it is all about being able to live in this community happily and without having any troubles with villagers, because she wanted to keep the life here. For that, they have to be involved in the village, this is really important for her.

Q: Apart from feeling peaceful for being able to engage in the community, do they want to be involved in the community? Do they enjoy being in the community?

A: She has gained so much from starting to farm, she has learnt so much new things from the life here. It is not like she just wants to keep living here, it is really important for her because she gained so much from them from living here. That’s why she wanted to keep doing the life she has right now. She and her husband think that it is meaningless to get a job in Tokyo that they go to work on week days and having day offs on weekend, it does not mean anything to have a life like that in the countryside. They want to do the seasonal job of collecting wild editable plants in Spring, working hard in summer, living in nature like that is the life they think it’s important in the countryside.

Q: They wanted to live a life that is connected to nature?

T: Yes, that’s part of the reasons.