Interviewee: Yoshihiro san

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Q: Interviewer A: Interviewee T: Translator

Q: Can he describe his farming mode now?

A: He is growing a little bit of kozo for his job, for his family business, he grows rice, it is a typical farming mode here. He is also growing some veggies, but that is for self-consumption.

Q: When did he start having such farming style?

A: He started helping with rice farming when he was small. He started 16 years about making Japanese linen, a few years later he started growing his own. He wanted to grow the materials by himself, he was buying most of the materials from other places in Japan, but he wanted to grow some of them by himself, so he kind of developed a farm. It takes time for the kozo trees to grow to a level that is usable, he started harvesting the kozo trees 11 years ago.

Q: How long does it take for the tree become ready to make linen?

A: He said one year, they grow 2-3 meters in one year. At first, it only has one branch, the tree will grow some sub branches in the coming years, he could harvest more starting from the third year.

Q: Why did he want to make Japanese linen?

A: He was born in this village, and he went to the primary school in the next village. In that school, the students have to grow the kozo tree and the roots of the sticky plants by themselves, they make the graduation certificate by themselves with the Japanese linen they made from what they grew in the beginning. It really impressed him and he felt so amazed that he could make something with natural materials, and it was something worthy to him. He actually left the village and lived in the Joetsu city for four years, actually in this village or this area, there were many linen craftsmen, they had the culture of making Japanese linen more than 60 years, but since then the culture disappeared and it was just remained in primary school. People from this village tried to revive the culture, the got some subsidy from the government, and the villagers asked him if he wanted to come back and make Japanese linen. It was also something he wanted to do, so he came back.

Q: Why did the villagers ask him to come back? Did he already know how to make it?

A: There was a group of people from this village, they built this building using the subsidy, they were the people who are organizing the drum group and they are growing kozo trees themselves, they were trying to make some Japanese linen. They wanted to have some young people to come back to take over the position of Japanese linen craftsman, he got the information from them and he was also interested in making Japanese linen because of the memory from primary school. He just told the company he wanted to quit and he was leaving in three days.

Q: What was he doing at that time?

A: He was working at Notsu port and repairing ships and metal tools.

Q: Why did he want to leave the village and work in the city at that time?

A: He wanted to get away from his parents, it's simple but it was really important.

T: I can relate to that!

A: He wanted to get rid of his parent at that time, but after that he knew that he should be thankful for them, he kind of realized it after he left the village, so it was really good for him.

Q: How did he learn the linen making skill?

A: The Japanese linen culture was disappeared in this village, but in Kaxxx village, there was another branch of Washi but it was originally from this village, yet the original culture just disappeared while the Kaxxxxx still preserves the skill, so he went there to learn it.

T: We passed by the studio and i showed you last time. He already has this studio at that time, so he just went there to learn the basic skills and he just came back here to try.

Q: Did he modify the skills learnt from the village, like adding something new?

A: The methods do not really change, but he is trying to make some new products. He collaborated with some artists to make Japanese linen, or he used Japanese straws and other natural materials to make linen, these are his original things.

(Yamamoto showing us his linen and artworks)

T: He mixed kozo and different types of natural materials, e.g. cherry blossoms, rice straws, Japanese cedars.

Q: Did he face any challenges after he came back?

A: There are too many challenges, he has to everything by himself, making and the sales of the linen, he does not have enough time. He wanted to make a linen but he has to go out for event and sales, something like that. That's the challenging part. Compared to normal linen craft, it costs more than double because he takes a lot of time and makes it from trees directly, his products are expensive, he is having a hard time to convince people about the values of his linen.

Q: How did he start collaborating with different artists?

A: The collaboration with artists is one of the projects of the Art Festival in 2009 and 2012. He designed and made what he designed, but it was too demanding for him, it was annoying so he just quitted it. The artist himself was not active, he did not visit for six years, but he still took money from the products and the process, these made him quit the project eventually. Quitting the project gives him more time to do what he wanted to do, which is collecting natural materials from the mountains and made new linen. He wanted to do these for a long time but he did not have time, but after quitting the project, he started making linen that he wanted to make since last year. He thinks that the Japanese linen is really beautiful when you see it see through light, he wanted to make lamp shades. He is also doing a Washi workshop in this studio, he someone wants to do it, he can make lamp shade by what he made, he can draw calligraphy and put some kimono cloth together, he is planning and trying to make it happen. He is also trying to make one linen with different materials, so it is going to be beautiful to produce different effects under the light, something like that. He wanted to make linen beyond the usage of linen, so that people can know the good things about Japanese linen in their life. He is interested to broaden the usage of Japanese linen.

Q: How does he mainly sell his linen now?

A: He is making linen for sake labels and wrapping kimono cloth, and hotel uses his linen for menu of individual dinners. Tsumari beer is putting his linen on top of the barrel.

Q: What are the positive experiences?

A: He got the opportunity to meet and talk to different people because he is doing this job, he is working by himself and sometimes it is really tough, but he can think really freely about his job and what he makes. It becomes a product and goes to the world, seeing that something he makes by his hands can be spread to different people around the world, he is very happy about it.

Q: You mentioned that they have a drum group here in this village, what does he think about the connection between making the Japanese linen and connecting with the community?

A: About the drum group, it is actually different group of people who are playing the drum and those who built this studio. They have to join the drum group from 3 to 18 years old, you got the local connection with the elders or some other generations, it is really important because it is kind of weird to have frank conversations with the seniors, it is difficult to have this kind of relationships, especially in closed community around here. Being in the drum group makes villagers connect together closely across generations, that's why it was easy for him to come back and get back to the community again. He has three friends in the same grade, two of them had left when he came back, they actually came back because he came back, these things happen because of the connections with senior villagers, so they are really connected and united in this village, that's really important thing that the drum group is doing.

A: About linen crafts, there is a shrine up there and he wanted to involve in the revitalization of this village by his Linen crafts. He is having those workshops so people can come here to see how this village is like, he wanted to show them how this village is like, he hoped that the village can be seen by his linen crafts. Through his job, he wanted to do something to contribute to this village. It is like a preparation job...right now there is no empty house in this village, but he predicts that the village is going to change a lot in 10 years, there will be empty houses. He wanted to prepare the villagers to accept someone coming from other places, and if the village is attractive, people would like to come, he wanted to prepare for them. Some people think in a conservative way, they want to protect the village by themselves, but in these 10 years, the situation is going to change, he wants to make this village more active. When the time comes, he wants to accept new people, and if he can make this village active, more people are willing to come.

(Showing him the pictures of the artworks, and the translator explaining the artworks)

T: He has seen all of them. This is far away (Galaxy house), he had a lot of fun (Seppuku Pistols), this is too local (Human re-entering nature), he likes it here, it was very quiet (POTEMKIN). The space is like old and aging because of the materials, that atmosphere kind of calmed him down.

A: Having these art pieces on the rice fields is really something special about this region, it is really unique.

Q: How does he feel about this artwork (Human re-entering nature) because it is local to him.

A: In the beginning of the art festival, they wanted to make it like this in summer, but the locals are really kind to him, they cared about this art piece so they cut all the vines around him, he was kind of naked.

Q: The locals like it so they take care of it?

T: They cared, it is just kindness and generosity. It is their definition of beauty to cut all the weeds on landscapes and rice fields.

Q: How does he see the connection between his farming and linen making crafts?

A: He is making Japanese linen throughout the year, no matter what season it is, but summer is actually not a good season to good season, winter is. It was also the same for local farmers, summer is for rice farming, winter is for linen work. It is a sustainable and natural cycle, he farms and makes linen for his living, making veggies is the same as growing kozo trees. If he improves in either of them, the other thing will improve, life and everything is all connected in one cycle.