

Discussions on the regional characteristics of the Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land Buddhism) association in the Kurobe River alluvial fan – A case study of Doichi, Nyuzen Town

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Abstract

This paper aimed to clarify the regional characteristics of the religious organization and factors responsible for its sustenance through its relationships between blood or family relations and the social structure of a region with a case study of Doichi, Nyuzen Town. The survey method consisted of an analysis of literature and interviews with residents. Firstly, we examined the framework and activities of religious organization in the Doichi area in the order of Ho-on-Ko (報恩講) associations, temple associations, and village associations, using Kosei Temple of the Otani sect and Zensho Temple of the Hongan-ji sect as examples. Secondly, we considered the social structure of the Doichi area and provide clues for thinking about its relationship with the religious organization and the factors responsible for maintaining it. Finally, we found that in addition to its connections to everyday life, the han (班) also strengthens its unity as a han through the events that it holds. We also saw that the han is formed on the basis of patriarchal family relationships and that it displays a significant connection among families in various events. It is well known that the Hokuriku region has a strong devotion to Shin Buddhism. Consequently, when discussing the preservation of religious organization, much of the focus has been on the faith-related and religious aspects of the region. It is also important, however, to pay great attention to the relationship between religious organizations and social structure in the region on which this study focused.

Key words: Jodo Shinshu, religious organization, social structure, social sustainability, Nyuzen Town

1. Introduction

1.1. Research theme

The Hokuriku region is a major religious area for Jodo Shinshu (“True Pure Land Buddhism,” referred to as “Shin Buddhism” hereafter).

The religious order in this area has undergone rapid growth ever since Rennyo, the eighth abbot of the Hongan-ji Temple, settled in Echizen Yoshizaki (present-day Awara City, in Fukui Prefecture) in 1471 C.E.. Its teachings have even transcended the Hokuriku region, extending as far as Kanto and Oshu. Under Rennyo’s missionary work, numerous Buddhist temples belonging to other sects converted to Shin Buddhism; there remains a high ratio of Shin Buddhist temples in these areas today (mainly belonging to the Otani sect and the Hongan-ji sect). Fig. 1 shows the distribution of Jodoshu Buddhism temples (Jodoshu Buddhism and Jodo Shin Buddhism) by prefecture. From this, we can see that Jodo Buddhism temples make up over 50% of the temples in Hokuriku area prefectures.

Shin Buddhism is thought to have spread its teachings through group activities based in the “association” (Ko). The organization of associations in sub-regional units in Hokuriku also played a large part in this endeavor.

The two major formats of association seen in Shin Buddhism are “temple associations” (Tera-o-Ko 寺御講), which are based in temples, and “village associations” (Mura-o-Ko 村御講), which are based in the homes of

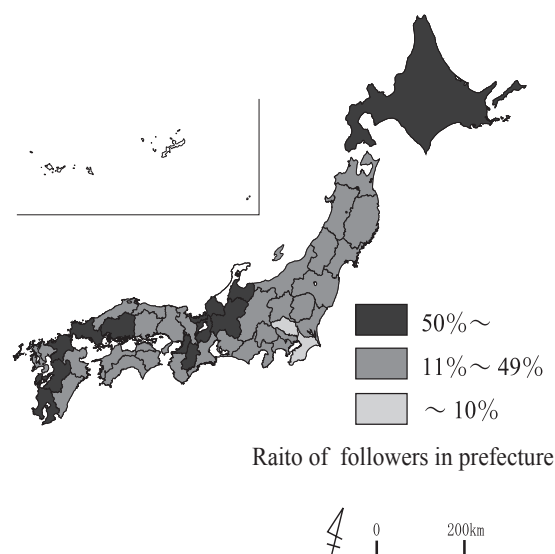


Fig.1 The distribution of Jodoshu Buddhism temples (Jodoshu Buddhism and Jodo Shin Buddhism)
Source: Oda. (2003)

*There is no date of Ishikawa and Okinawa prefectures

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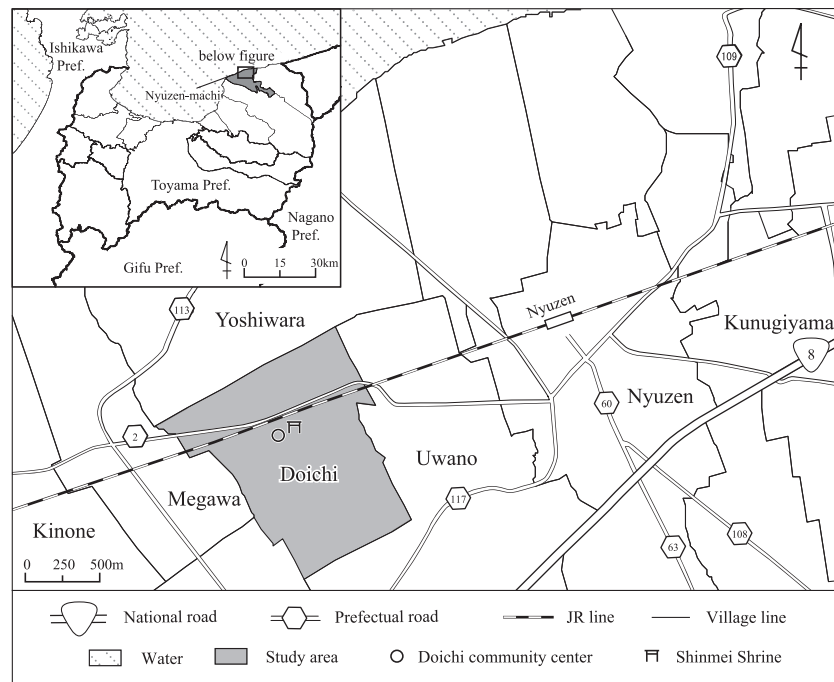


Fig.2 Reserch target area

villagers. Because temple associations are conducted with followers of the same sects who gather at tetsugi-dera (手次寺), attendance includes members from more than one village. In contrast, village association activities are conducted with followers from each tetsugi-dera temple in a single village, or followers from the same sect in a single village, who gather at the home of a villager.

Such religious gatherings do more than generate spiritual connections. They also reflect the social structure of the village, and preserve and strengthen the public order of the village society and the bonds between members.

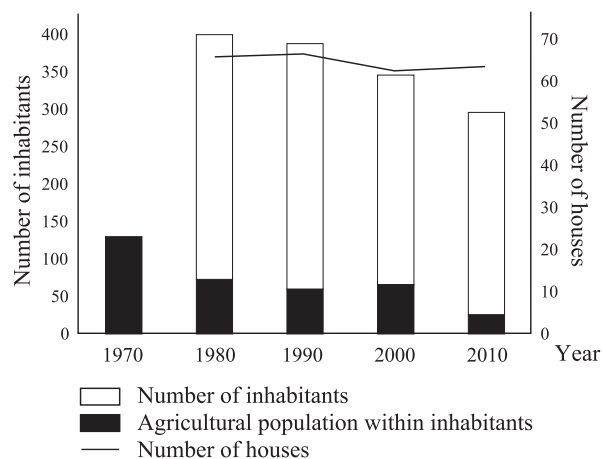


Fig. 3 Number of inhabitants and houses in Doichi

*there is no date of number of inhabitants and houses in 1970
Source : Census of Agriculture and Basic Resident Reifgister

Moreover, like associations in other faiths, the association of Shin Buddhism is structurally linked to village society (Morioka, 1978). Among studies making such links, Uji (1996) in particular has stated that the social structure of the village is the foundation for both temple associations and village associations; it is also heavily involved in maintaining them. Uji focused on hierarchical and familial relationships, and on the social structure within the community, as a way of analyzing village structure.

Keeping that viewpoint in mind, this study aims to clarify the regional characteristics of the religious association and the factors responsible for supporting it through its relationship with family and blood relations and its relation with the social structure of its region, using the Doichi, Nyuzen-machi region, as a case study.

The survey method consisted of an analysis of literature and interviews with residents. The interviews took place from September 10 through September 15, 2012. The questionnaire targeted household heads throughout the Doichi area (63 households). It administered questions about the state of their involvement in the social structure, the frequency of their participation in the various area events, and their awareness of, and actions pertaining to, religious structures, with a focus on the associations. This questionnaire was implemented in late November of 2012. We obtained answers from 37 of 63 households (the collection rate was 58.7%). Regarding the respondent breakdown, the majority were at least 60 years in age and had lived in the area for at least 40 years.

1.2. Overview of the research target area

Doichi, which served as the research area, is located approximately one kilometer west of the built-up area of the Nyuzen district. As of September 2012, it had 63 houses and a population of 241 people (Fig.2). Looking at fluctuations in the population and number of houses (Fig. 3) reveals only a very slow decline, with almost no overall change. According to the interviews, only two families moved into the area in the last 50 years. The opinion expressed in the interviews was that, because of this, the population and number of households in the area are more stable than in other areas in Nyuzen.

In terms of the social structure of the Doichi area, in addition to the local government there are various types of organizations for the overall area as well as organizations overseeing the han groups, which are sub-organizations of the area. There are four han groups, and each is divided into “Front” (Omote), “Central” (Naka), “West” (Nishi), and “East” (Higashi) (Fig. 4).

In terms of the organization of religious groups, there is a shrine (Shinmei Shrine) congregation, composed of Shin Buddhism followers (Fig. 5). All area residents are part of the shrine congregation and, as such, participate in rites like the Fire Festival, Spring Festival, and Autumn Festival. Most of the area residents are followers of Shin Buddhism, with the Kosei Temple of the Otani sect and the Komyo and Zensho Temples of the Hongan-ji sect serving as the major tetsugi-dera (Fig. 6). The association is composed of

temple associations, village associations, and Hoon-ko associations (memorial service for Shinran Shonin). Of these, the Otani sect and Hongan-ji sect followers conduct village associations every month.

The format of these village associations differs for each area. Some areas have separate associations for the Otani and Hongan-ji sects, while in other areas, the role of association leader alternates among the head priests of each sect. Okuda (2006), who surveyed the conditions for associations in the focus area for this study, reported that although many areas stopped holding associations in recent years, Shin Buddhism gatherings are still held in the Doichi area today.

The next section of this study examines the framework and activities of associations in the Doichi area—including Hoon-ko associations, temple associations, and village associations—using Kosei Temple of the Otani sect and Zensho Temple of the Hongan-ji sect as examples.

2. Framework and activities of Shin Buddhism religious organization in the Doichi area

2.1. Ho-on-Ko associations

The Ho-on-Ko association, held to express feelings of gratitude and a sense of debt toward Shin Buddhism founder Shinran, is one of the most important events in Shin Buddhism. For the memorial association, followers gather at tetsugi-dera. Afterwards, the head priest visits each of the followers' homes, where he performs a religious

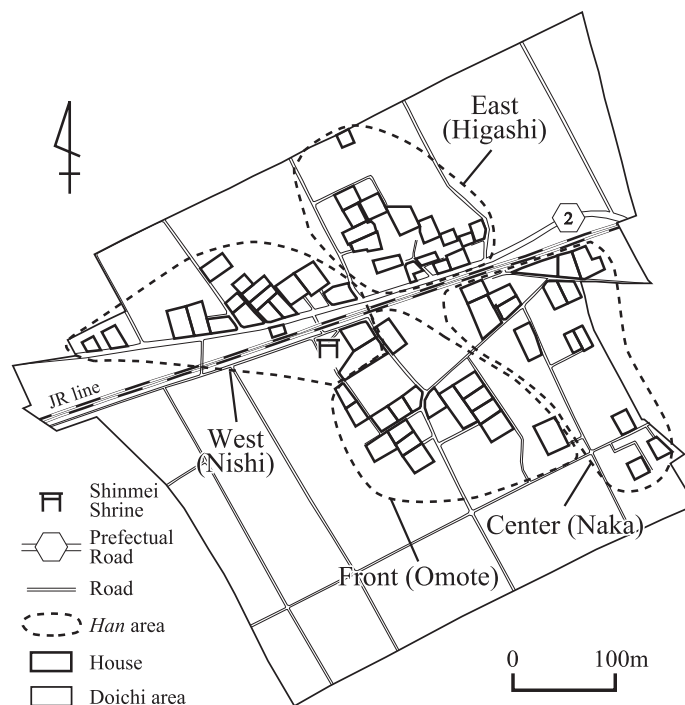


Fig. 4 Distribution boundaries of Han-groups in Doichi, 2012
Source : field survey



Fig. 5 Shinmei Shrine

service.

At the Kosei Temple of the Otani sect, followers from the adjacent Yoshiwara area (Fig. 1) prepare meals for the event, and two to three people from the Doichi and Kinone areas provide help on the day of the event. About 300 people gather for the actual memorial association, and many of Doichi area residents are the more active participants; if unable to attend on the event day, a great many will go to the temple on a later day.

Many followers participate at the Zensho Temple of the Hongan-ji sect as well, including people from the Doichi area (mostly the family heads). Some 400 people gather

every year. About six followers from the surrounding area prepare the food, as is the case in the Kosei Temple association.

2.2. Temple associations

At temple associations, followers gather at tetsugi-dera for associations. The temple associations at Kosei Temple are held twice a month. Kosei Temple followers from the areas of Doichi, Shimoino, Ueno, and Yoshiwara participate. Each area is responsible for temple association duties, such as preparing meals and greeting visitors, for one month. For the Doichi area, one of the three local Kosei Temple follower organizations is responsible for preparations. According to interviews, approximately half of the Doichi area followers participate each time.

At the Zensho Temple, associations are held once a month. As in the case at the Kosei Temple, the area that will be responsible for duties and assistance is decided for each month; followers from each area prepare meals and perform other tasks. For the Doichi area, approximately three men handle the duties.

2.3. Village associations

Followers of the Otani and Hongan-ji sects hold village associations together around the 20th of each month. A special Okobutsu-sama (Amida Butsu statuette) is used for

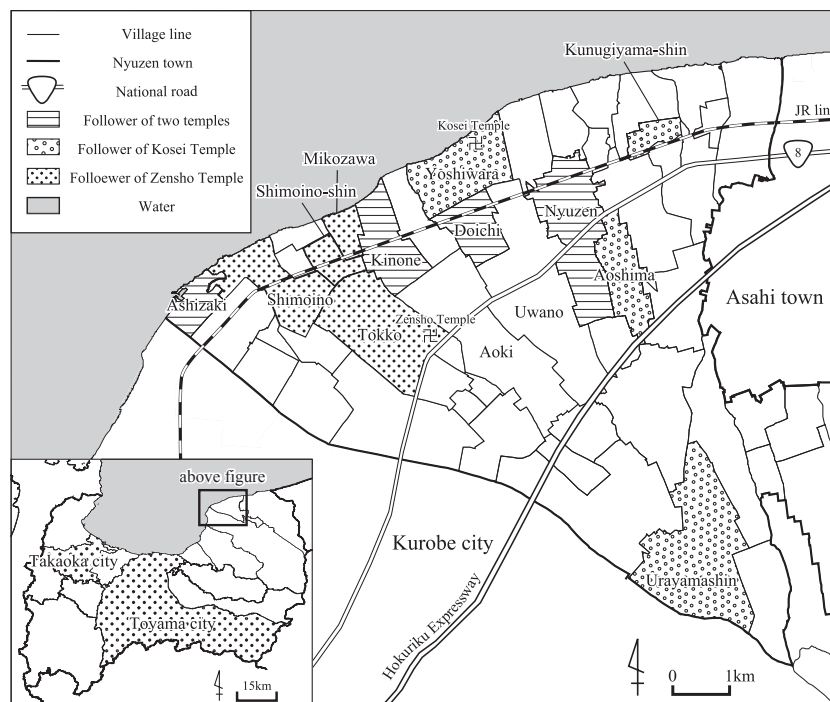


Fig. 6 Distribution of the followers of Kosei and Zensho Temples, 2012

Source: field survey

*We could not distinguish the district where the followers distribute in both Toyama and Takaoka city

village associations. When associations are held, the statuette is transported from the community center, where it is normally kept, to the house that will serve as the association venue.

In the study area, the head priests of each Kosei Temple perform a religious service for the village associations in succession. Because of this, the Shoshinge (正信偈) (“The Hymn of True Faith”) used for the sutra reading is in the Otani sect format. However, there are no differences in the decorations and offerings for Okobutsu-sama (御講仏様) seen among the sects. Incidentally, area residents refer to the temple holding the religious service as Okodera-san and to the head priest as Okobo-san.

The people who provide a venue and make preparations for a village association are called Okotoban (O is an honorific prefix, ko means “association,” and toban (当番) means “in charge of a task”). The han, a subsidiary organization of the area, is divided into three smaller groups, and a household head from each group serves as the Okotoban (御講当番). The Okotoban is responsible for the cost of refreshments and association donations given to the head priest (around 5,000 to 10,000 yen), as well as for the 600 yen given to the district as maintenance expenses for the Okobutsu-sama after the association. This assistance is handled by the rojinkai (老人会) (the resident elderly community’s association) for the adjoining Kinone area and by the Women’s Association for the Aoki area; however, in the study area each household is responsible for providing assistance.

In addition, in the Doichi area village association participation is customarily expected of the household heads from the same han as the assisting family. This tradition is still observed today. Some area residents revealed in interviews that they perceive village associations to be “han or area events,” in addition to their role as religious events. About ten people participate each time, including household heads from the same han and area residents from other han. The majority of participants are elderly area residents (Fig. 7).

Next, we will use the results from the questionnaire survey to consider current trends in participation for gratitude associations, temple associations, and village associations. Fig. 8 shows the participation awareness for associations in the Dochi area is still strong today. In fact, the majority of residents indicated active participation for each type of association with answers like “I always participate,” or “I often participate.” Specifically, “I always participate” or “I often participate” appeared in 76% of responses for gratitude associations, 60% for temple associations, and 50% for village associations. From this, we can see that participation awareness is high. For village associations, if the statement “I sometimes

participate” is included, the participation rate rises to approximately 80%. The results gave a strong impression of the importance and familiarity of village associations to the lives of Dochi area residents.

3. Social structure and its function in the Doichi area

In this section, we consider the social structure of the Doichi area, as well as provide clues for thinking about its relationship with the association and the factors responsible for maintaining it. Specifically, we will be examining of the social structure for the han and for the area. We will start with a description of the han.

3.1. Han organization

3.1.1. Organization and activities

The han, which is the smallest social unit in the Doichi area, has a han leader and accounting officer. In all of the han groups, the responsibility of serving in these positions is rotated among households within each han.

The han is the most closely linked element of the social structure for Doichi area residents. It is deeply connected to everyday life. Some examples include the han-sponsored annual shinnenkai party bringing in the new year, the doro otoshi (a thank-you party held after rice planting is finished, also called no agari), and han vs. han softball games. At funerals, area residents from the same han help receive guests and prepare meals.

In addition, the importance of the han’s role can be seen in instances such as its role as the basic unit for transferring village association duties, as discussed above, and in the customary participation of the family heads from the han that conducts the association. Activities based around the han unit are held throughout the entire year, and area residents maintain the strength of its ties and its unity by participating in those events.



Fig. 7 The ko association

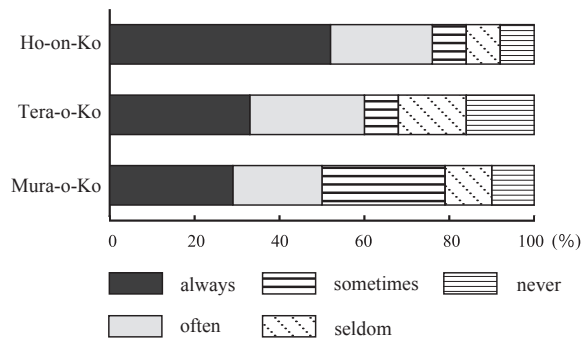


Fig. 8 Residents' participation for several associations in the Doichi area (Source: questionnaire)

3.1.2. Familial unity

In addition to binding the community together through the serving in the association, han groups are also formed based on familial linkages. Fig. 9 shows the relationships between the head and collateral families in the study area. In the center han, Head Family A established five collateral families, with four of them in the central han (Naka). In fact, according to this figure., this phenomenon is not limited to Family A; there are many other collateral families established in the same han. This attests to the familial linkage within the han.

3.2. Social structure

3.2.1. Community association

The social structure for the area includes a community association as well as various other groups. The community association consists of positions such as area leader, assistant area leader, accounting officer, and auditor-secretary. The major activities include the regular general assembly, ordinary sessions, and preparations for events connected with various other groups.

3.2.2. Various groups

Other various groups include age-specific groups such as the Young Men's Association, Kakushukai (確守会), Doshikai (同志会), the Young Wives' Association and Women's Association, and the Senior Citizens' Association. The groups do not have any bylaws, and there are no specific rules regarding joining and leaving these groups; basically, all of the area residents are said to participate. The specific activities of each group are outlined below.

3.2.2.1. Young men's association

Young men join the Young Men's Association after graduating from school, and switch to the Kakushukai when they reach the age of 30. In the past, there were as many as 20 members, but currently the membership has dwindled to six. Major activities throughout the year consist of things like helping out at the Autumn Festival and the Uehara area community carnival. The Autumn Festival,

held in October, is a particularly important event.

The Autumn Festival is the largest event in the area. Highlights, such as the te-odori (手踊り) hand dances performed by children and the portable shrine parade, go on all day. The Young Men's association is responsible for the actual administration of the festival. In addition to transporting carts, serving as portable shrine carriers, and giving taiko drum performances, they also direct the te-odori hand dancing. Together with the Kakushukai, discussed below, these young and middle-aged area residents in the Doichi area are the central force behind the important Autumn Festival, through which they inherit tradition and culture.

3.2.2.2. Kakushukai (Men's association)

The membership of the Kakushukai consists of men who have grown out of the Young Men's Association, and includes men up to 40 years of age. The name Kakushukai was created to reflect the idea of "protecting tradition."

The association is responsible for preparations for major events like the Autumn Festival, the Cherry Blossom Viewing Festival, and the Bon Dance Assembly. They work together with the Young Men's Association to direct the dances at the Autumn Festival. Practice begins about two weeks before the festival, with almost no days off. Their devotion and direction always make the festival an incredibly successful event, encouraging many area residents to participate. In interviews, people acknowledged that the Autumn Festival is what it is because the Kakushukai exists, and that the Kakushukai plays a central role in administering and maintaining events.

3.2.2.3. Doshikai

The Doshikai membership consists of men who have grown out of the Kakushukai, and includes men up to 63 years of age. Their major activities include the Cherry Blossom Viewing Festival and the Bon Dance Assembly. In particular, as the host group they take care of the preparations and clean up at both events. The Cherry Blossom Viewing Festival is held at the community center. With around 100 people participating, about half of all the area residents, it is the area's major leisure event.

3.2.2.4. Young wives' association/Women's association

Upon marrying and moving into the Doichi area, women up to 35 years old participate in the Young Wives' Association, while women 35-60 years old participate in the Women's Association. The two groups often collaborate on activities such as preparing miso soup with pork and participating in the Bon Dance Assembly.

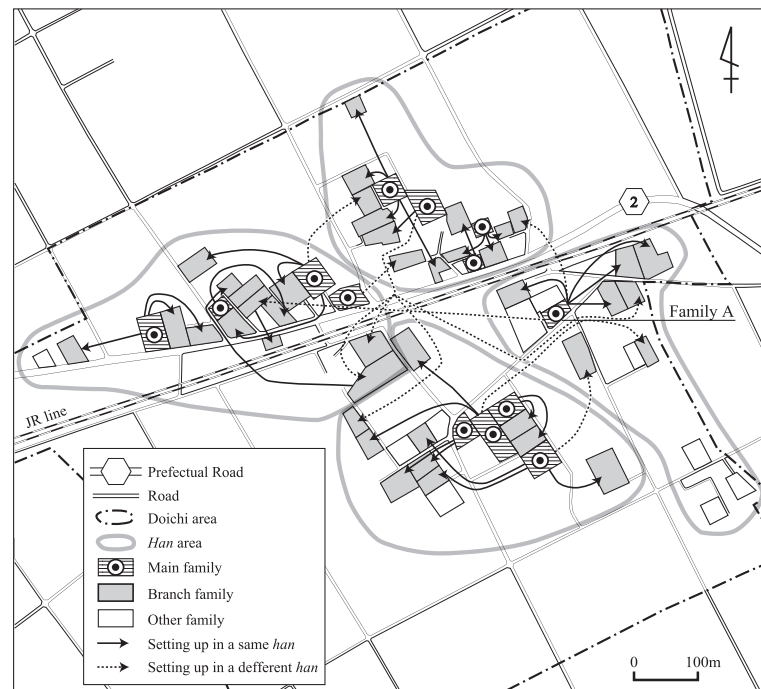


Fig.9 Relationships between the head families and collateral families
(Source: field survey)

3.2.2.5. Senior citizens' association

Senior Citizens' Association consists of men and women over 60 years of age. Major activities include holding paper lanterns at the Autumn Festival, cleaning places like the nearby Uehara Park, and memorial associations for the deceased. The Senior Citizens' Association holds events like the annual shinnenkai (新年会) party, which brings in the new year, and a trip every two years. They are a very active group.

3.3. Increasing resident awareness through the social structure

In the previous sections, we have discussed the social structure of the Doichi area. We saw that in addition to its connections to everyday life, the unity of the han is also strengthened through the events it holds. We also saw that the han is formed on the basis of the relationships between the head family and collateral families, and that it supports significant connections among families through various events.

In terms of the social structure of the area as a whole, we saw that both the community association and other various groups exist, and that these other various groups in particular are connected to the administration and maintenance of various events. These kinds of activities can be thought of as naturally reflecting the importance of passing down the area's traditions and culture, as well as

contributing to the cultivation of residents' self-awareness of themselves as area residents. This point is notably expressed in the frequency of the residents' participation in annual events. In the aforementioned survey, we asked about the frequency of participation in annual events in the Doichi area. According to the results shown in Fig.10, the residents who answered "I always participate" or "I sometimes participate" for all events—including, among others, the Fire Festival, Spring Festival, community sports events, and Autumn festival—were in the majority. In particular, the autumn festival, which is considered the largest event for the community, enjoys an almost 100% participation rate from residents. The frequency of participation speaks to an intensely strong sense of community and belonging among residents.

Moreover, because there are only a few households in the target area, the chance of serving as an officer in either the community association or one of the various groups is high. The interviews showed that, in general, people are selected to be an officer in at least one group once every four to five years. The survey also contained questions regarding officer experience within the social structure of the community. Results showed that nearly 90% of the respondents had held some kind of officer post at some point. This kind of officer experience plays an important role in strengthening the feeling of belonging to the area.

It is thought that geographical features play a part in the

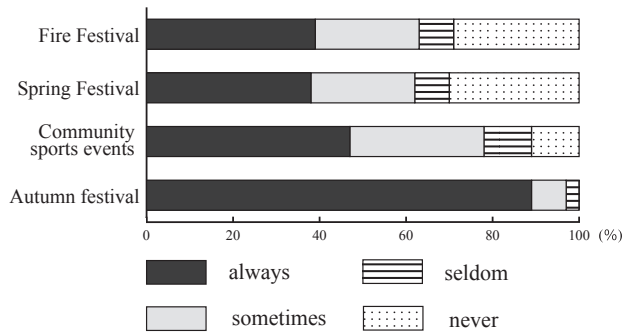


Fig. 10 Frequency of participation in annual events in Doichi (Source: questionnaire)

continuing preservation of the Doichi area social structure described above. Even though the study area neighbors an urban area, the number of households moving into the area has been extremely low. This factor may be significant in explaining the unity of the area and the successful transmission of culture. According to area residents, in addition to the aforementioned annual events, all households still participate in ezarai cleaning and shrine cleanings. This really demonstrates just how unified this area is.

4. Structure of the association in the Doichi Area and factors responsible for maintaining the structure

The final section examines the association structure and the factors responsible for maintaining that structure from the viewpoint of the association structure's relationship with the social structure of the area, which was discussed in the previous section. Here we will focus on village associations.

The duties of the Doichi area village association are handled by individual households, with one household in the group (made by dividing the han into smaller units) responsible for the duties. It has become a custom for each of the family heads from the same han as the household responsible for performing the duties to also participate; from this, we can see that village association activities are conducted with a strong connection to the han unit.

Additionally, village associations function as memorial services for ancestors. In their responses to the survey, some respondents gave paying homage to ancestors as their reason for participation in village associations. According to the results (Table 1), the highest percentage of respondents, 37%, gave the reason "homage to ancestors." The second most frequent answer, at 21%, was "it was my han's turn to oversee the village association." Lastly, 16% answered "religious devotion." Area residents maintain bonds among family members through memorial associations for ancestors, and this function of the associations is linked to the aspects of the han related to the family. The

relationship between the structure of the association and the social structure can thus be seen in this feature as well.

Keeping this relationship with the social structure in mind, next we will consider the factors responsible for maintaining village associations.

As discussed above, in the Doichi area people in every age group have opportunities to participate, administer, and serve as officers for events. This, coupled with the strong unity caused by the low frequency of immigrating families, helps to preserve the area and han events up through the present day. We can surmise that one special characteristic of the study area is that—as is the case with the previously mentioned events—the village associations, with their intimate connections to the area's social structure, are also valued as a conduit for the area's culture and traditions. This is underlined by the fact that there are many area residents who feel that, in addition to being a Shin Buddhism religious event, the village association is also a "han and area event." In other words, we can make the claim that the family heads, with their obligations to the village associations, have naturally led and participated in village associations on the basis of their sense of identity as area residents, a sense of identity that has been cultivated over many years in their social lives within the area.

The fact that most of the area residents are followers of Shin Buddhism is an important factor for maintaining village associations. We can state that this point in particular is an element shared throughout the entire span of the Hokuriku region, which possesses a history filled with ardent support for Shin Buddhism. The village association's function as a memorial service for ancestors can be acknowledged as a factor contributing to the preservation of village association practices.

Previous studies have pointed out that the social structures of villages have deep connections with the structures of religious groups and with the preservation of such religious structures. These deep connections are visible in the Doichi area as well. We have seen that the association is preserved by multilayered connections: the structural relationship between village associations and the han unit, the sense of identity that area residents attain through activities corresponding to the social structure of han and area units, and characteristics of the Doichi area such as the majority of the population's adherence to Shin Buddhism and the limited flow of new residents into the area.

The Hokuriku region has a strong devotion to Shin Buddhism. Consequently, when discussing the preservation of religious organization, much of the focus has been on the faith-related and religious aspects of the region. It is also important, however, to pay attention to the relationship between the association and social structure in the region

Table.1 Reasons of participation in village associations

reasons	the number of answers	(%)
homage to ancestors	7	(37)
it was my han	4	(21)
religious devotion	3	(16)
having spare time	2	(11)
parents' participation	2	(10)
acquaintances' participation	1	(5)
sum (%)	19	(100)

*multiple answers possible (Source: questionnaire)

on which this study is focused.

However, in recent years the decline of the youth population as people leave the area is reportedly becoming significant. Evidence for this trend is markedly visible in the Young Men's Association's and Kakushukai's membership. The Dochi area, which has traditionally not experienced any major fluctuations, now shows symptoms of change. Reactionary measures, such as raising the transfer age of various groups, are being implemented in the area. However, because the responsibility for organizing and conducting major area events falls mainly on the shoulders of the youth and young adults, the problem of organizing and conducting these events is severe. In addition to these points, we are also seeing definite changes in village associations. The aforementioned survey included questions about changes in current village associations compared to the past. About 80% of the residents who responded to the survey responded that they perceived some sort of change. Regarding the cause of the changes (Fig. 11), the 51% of respondents answered "Reduction in the number of participants." Other responses concerning the cause contained opinions such as "Reduction in religious devotion" and "Change in age demographics." These all point to the possibility of large-scale changes in the social structure, operation, and format of village associations in the future.

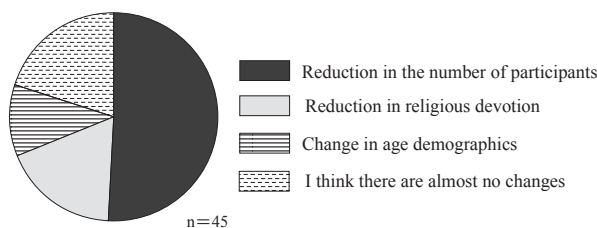


Fig.11 Changes religious attitudes in current village associations
*multiple answers possible (Source: questionnaire)

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