

COMMUNITY

Propping up art of thatching

By **MAGGIE SAIKI**
Special to the Asahi Evening News

An American finds it difficult to consider such a structure as a dwelling," wrote Japanophile Edward S. Morse in the late 19th century, in an effort to describe the Japanese home. In his now classic text, "Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings," Morse described the great variety of ridge treatments on thatched homes, and the simplicity of the framework, a tied latticework of bamboo and logs onto which are lashed the thatching materials, all with straw rope. Near the end of his treatise, he writes, "(one) wonders why the architects of our own country have not seen fit to extend their taste and ingenuity to the roof..."

Nowadays, far from inspiring the same marvel among Japanese, the thatched roof seems to be nearing extinction, with little chance of survival. Whereas a century ago, thatch was the easiest and cheapest way to cover one's head, it is arguably now the most expensive and difficult choice of roofing materials.

The problems associated with thatched homes are so numerous, in fact, that a two-day National Conference of Thatchers was held last month at Kongoji Temple in Osaka Prefecture to discuss them. Attended by 60, mostly elderly, thatchers from all over the country, it was a welcome move toward a unified national policy on preserving these architectural wonders.

But the most urgent question is: will any move taken now stop the destruction of thatched homes?

Guest speakers included Jinichi Murakami from the Cultural Affairs Agency; Sadayoshi Sato, a public education official from Kobe who works to convince owners to keep their thatched homes; and Haruo Nishio, a young university-educated thatcher from



COURTESY OF JAPAN NATIONAL TRUST

Volunteers help rethatch a traditional 'gassho' (steep rafted roof) farmhouse belonging to the Japan National Trust in Shirakawa Village, Gifu Prefecture, in 1996.

Kyoto Prefecture, who recently visited Britain to study alternative thatching methods and the support systems that have given British thatched properties a new lease on life.

The older master thatchers, most of whom were in suits, listened with varying degrees of attention as the best means of maintaining their craft were argued from the podium.

During questions and answers, the thatchers spoke up on issues on which their livelihoods depended.

For example, traveling great distances to repair thatched properties designated by the Cultural Affairs Agency poses financial risks that are hard for an independent thatcher to take, as ten days of rain means ten days of lost earnings.

Storing thatch without creating fire hazards is another logistical requirement that adds to the expense of thatching and diminishes its competitiveness.

One of the thatchers who repairs designated historical properties contended that unless a concerted nationwide effort is made to preserve ordinary thatched homes as well, thatchers will not have enough work to keep their skills honed for heritage preservation.

Thatching grew out of an agricultural lifestyle, and a

tight local community system, and the widespread abandonment of that lifestyle in the mid 1960s wiped a good number of thatched properties off the cultural map of Japan.

Only 10 percent of wooden structures protected by the Cultural Affairs Agency are thatched. They total a mere 300, compared to 65,000 maintained in Britain, and 90,000 in Germany.

The swift and steady decrease in thatched properties has put thatching, already a loosely organized industry, practiced by farmers and professional thatchers alike, in a terribly precarious position.

Kazuhiro Nitto, of the Japanese Association for Conservation of Architectural Monuments, estimates that there are still around 3,000 thatchers in Japan, and as many methods as master thatchers.

The development of thatching as a part of farm life has deterred its practitioners from forming corporations, thus isolating them further and hampering their ability to compete with modern materials.

Nitto and others argued that if thatched buildings are to be preserved, the rich diversity of its traditional methods must be preserved, for like so many Japanese crafts, thatching

techniques vary considerably by locality.

The sad fact is that thatching is dying out in Japan.

More than three-quarters of the remaining thatchers are in their 60s and 70s, and a few are in their 80s. The beauty of thatched roofs has drawn a fair number of young men into the trade, but the numbers are by no means sufficient to ensure survival, nor is there enough work to convince even these that they have chosen a viable career.

Takashi Yoshimura, a panelist who owns one of the few designated thatched farmhouses, supposes that "people are becoming further and further removed from their houses. In my father's time, I can swear that he considered himself and his house one entity. I am a bit further removed, and my children will undoubtedly consider the home simply a place in which their lives unfold."

The thatched home is a living and breathing entity, and those who attended the conference put their heads together on the primary problem of the coming century; how much further can we remove ourselves from nature and still preserve it?

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