Woodland Landscape in Edo Period Japan with Specific Reference to Yakushima in Satsuma Domain

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This short paper is the first in a series which will look at the way various woodland landscapes have been appropriated over time by different groups in a Japanese context. These papers will look at the landscape as a symbolic system. That is to say that the focus will be on how forest areas have been shaped in the past and continue to be adapted to the needs and beliefs of the inhabitants, as well as considering what meanings are given to the landscape. This first paper in the series introduces woodland landscape in Japan through a brief introduction of forest use up to the Edo period, and focuses on the example of change in forest landscape use on Yakushima island in Southern Japan. In particular, the paper will look at how the wooded landscape was used in many guises as a landscape of sacredness, exclusion, power, and products during the Edo period.

Pre-Edo Period woodland use in Japan

Ancient woodland landscapes and the Japanese people’s affinity for them have a long and varied history. So it is perhaps surprising in this vastly wooded archipelago to find so little direct contact between man and the forest landscape in our present century. Today, as Berque rightly suggests, for the majority of the population, the woodland of choice has nothing more than “a whiff of Arcadia: a grassy plain broken up by copses” (Berque
1997:91), and the new parklands that are regularly set out close to the larger urban populations merely serve to reflect this choice, with stunted trees and large grassy open areas, where a sense of security and control over nature are omnipresent. Many of the less accessible tracts of Japanese forests, which include the last remnants of Japan's pristine glossy leaved forest, are avoided by most as landscapes of choice. The older forest which can be a jumbled, disorientating place is now often considered far too primeval. As Japan's economy has grown since the post war years, contact with the traditional wooded landscapes of their ancestors is no longer of relevance for the majority of the Japanese.

This is only a relatively recent situation however, and for many hundreds of years, the mountains and the deep forests which stood upon them were landscapes within which a great many Japanese lived, worked and worshipped on a regular basis. The traditional areas of woodlands, those areas of forest belonging to a particular hamlet or community, were for centuries managed and used by locals to provide a variety of products which made living in these environments sustainable. As well as firewood, the forests provided charcoal which was vital for heating and cooking until the mid part of the twentieth century in many areas of Japan; also essential was manure to assure crops prospered, and edible wild plants, mushrooms and game. The majority of this wooded landscape was common forest land. While certain shrines and monasteries controlled their own local forests, and regional daimyo obtained timber locally by various means, there were few restrictions placed on the common people in Kamakura and Muromachi eras. (Totman 1989-37-39) At this time any forest policy was primarily a local matter, and it was the pre-eminent family or clan of each area which decided how the forest resources were used. This was certainly the case in Satsuma domain (present day Kagoshima Prefecture) where the Shimazu
family rose to power over 800 years ago, and from the mid sixteenth century in particular, their involvement in the forest landscape greatly affected Yakushima island, as this paper will show.

Throughout the four hundred years leading up to the Edo period, population density in Japan remained stable. As general forestry techniques also failed to advance to any great degree and constant wars between different clans hampered any would be efforts to clear cut forests on a large scale, an environmental balance was kept in most heavily forested regions. However, as urban centres began to grow, and as Japan became a stable nation state under Tokugawa rule, the dynamics that had indirectly protected Japanese forests were altered and the Edo period saw immense changes take place in how the woodland landscape was perceived and exploited by different groups. With the nation in a relatively pacified state after centuries of internal wars, huge building projects were undertaken across many areas of Japan from the latter part of the 16th century. The triumphant warlords built massive structures to display their hegemony, and the largest urban centres such as Edo, Kyoto and Osaka started to require more and more timber from regional forests for general housing as the cities grew. This building boom occurred on a local level too, and evidence from 1560 onwards which still survives in old documents details the use of cedar (Yakusugi) and Japanese cypress (hinoki) taken from Yakushima island to help in the construction of the Osumi-sho-hachiman-gu shrine in Kagoshima city (Matsumoto 2000: 69). Furthermore, when the eighteenth Lord of Satsuma had a castle erected in Kagoshima in 1601–2, much of the most striking timber would have come from similar sources.

With the start of the Edo Period in 1603, under Tokugawa rule which continued until 1868, the nationwide demand for enormous amounts of timber intensified quickly. In the first half of the 17th century, this ever increasing
demand for high quality timber caused many changes in the heavily forested areas of Japan. Tanaka (1998) notes how “between 1574 and 1619 some 200 castle towns were built”, as well as suggesting that “about 36% of pre-modern Japan’s civil engineering projects were undertaken between 1596 and 1672.” By looking in more detail at the case of Yakushima island, it can be understood how these demands on the woodland landscape came about, placing complicated social and economic strains on the communities that lived and worked within close proximity to these forests.

The Great Forests on Yakushima

In a sense, with its current World Heritage Site status, and more talk on environmental protection than ever, the future of Yakushima’s remaining pristine forests, seems more assured than at any time in the past. However, if we look back at the history of these wooded landscapes from the Edo period onward, it will become clear that this scenario was not always guaranteed. The forests of Yakushima still cover 90% of the island today, which is perhaps somewhat surprising, since over the past four centuries it is estimated that between 50% and 70% of the old growth forest, yakusugi cedar in particular, was cut as demand for the tree led to indiscriminate felling on an enormous scale.

The forests of Yakushima up to the Edo period had always been used by the local population, primarily for building materials, green fertilizer, firewood and charcoal. The evergreen broadleaf forests provided a number of species including sudajii (Castanopsis sieboldii), mokkoku (Ternstroemia gymnantha), kusunoki (Cinnamomum camphora) and sugi (Cryptomeria japonica). Although very common, sugi (cedar) was used relatively infrequently on the island. The villagers harvested mainly the sudajii which was very important for them as firewood and in charcoal production. It also served extremely well as a host for shiitake mushrooms which were
an important crop. Mokkoku was used in building because of its ability to repel termites in the hot humid climate of the island, a quality that kusonoki also had (Matsumoto 2000-57). Before the Edo period, the villagers tended to use only timber taken from the forest edges around the villages, believing that many of the forest giants, especially the larger yakusugi deeper in the forests at a higher altitude, were sacred trees in a domain of the gods, and as such should not be cut down. Although there is evidence from one or two stumps of Yakusugi remaining in the forest, that the trees were cut down as early as the mid fifteenth century, it wasn’t until a hundred years later in 1560, when timber was sent to Kagoshima to reconstruct the most important shrine, that the ever increasing control of the Shimazu clan came to really bear on the islanders, and the felling of Yakusugi as an industry became a key issue for Shimazu clan officials. From this time on, as the clan’s building projects grew and the realization of Yakushima’s inherent worth to the financial stability of the fief became more apparent, the forests started to come under threat in environmental terms. Up until this juncture, as Totman points out, for a period of 500 years or more there had been no new technological advances of note in forest arts, and little increased demand, so any forests that were cut, were able to recover naturally (1989:47).

By the last decades of the sixteenth century, the Shimazu lords, as with many of their counterparts throughout Japan were starting to assign clan officials to oversee the forest areas that interested them most. The local rulers began in effect to exert much more control over the woodland and its yield, and in the case of Yakushima this was demonstrated in 1588 when chief retainer Ijuin Tadamune and Shimazu Tadanaga visited Yakushima to procure more cedar and cypress for a building project in Kyoto, for which Toyotomi Hideyoshi himself had ordered timber. In the same year, the clan produced the Yakushima Island Provision (Yakushima okite), a document
in which it was made clear that any removal of Yakusugi from the island by individuals was strictly prohibited. In light of the following decades, it is highly likely that this local law was enacted, not with the protection of the forests in mind, but as a way of ensuring the Shimazu themselves would be the main benefactors from any logging that was to take place in future years.

While in principle there were three types of land tenure in Japan during the Edo period, with rights acknowledged for forests under feudal lords’ protection, communal woodland areas, and forest land belonging to individuals, in reality the third type hardly existed. The forests of Yakushima were divided very unequally into small areas of communal forest land where villagers were allowed to take firewood, manure and basic amounts of building material, and portions of forest that were controlled by the clan and designated “okuyama” or “ohayashi” (Lord’s forest) overseen by the Shimazu’s retainer. In fact, by 1612, the clan had promoted this retainer to the position of local timber magistrate (hinoki bugyou), after Yakushima became a direct possession of the fief. The Shimazu lands were controlled in much the same way as other semi-autonomous domains throughout Japan. Village elders administered local affairs according to the wishes of their lord, whose own samurai acted as island representatives to ensure that their feudal master’s laws were strictly adhered to. There were severe punishments in place for anyone caught stealing from the Lord’s land. Berque mentions the old adage which stated “a finger for a branch, a neck for a tree” which meant in other words that the value of the lord’s trees was deemed to be worth more than the life of any commoner (Berque 1997-76). “Tomeyama”, the Shimazu lord’s private forest reserve in which no removal of forest material whatsoever was allowed, remained jealously guarded and the policy of “tomeki” or reserved trees that were of economic value, was practiced even
when the designated tree was found on land that happened to be set aside for communal use (Totman, Iwai). This meant in practice that the villagers on Yakushima lost out on any economic benefit derived from the felling or trimming of the largest cedar and cypresses, wherever they happened to grow.

As early as 1595 the Shimazu clan had furthered their control over the timber resources on Yakushima by bringing in the Yakushima Okime Go Ka Jo (The Five Articles Yakushima Regulation), which laid down more detailed rules regarding the cedar and cypress forests in particular, solidifying their hegemony over the woodland landscape of the island. (Matsumoto 2000-69). From this period onwards the Shimazu domain started to concentrate their efforts towards removal of the cedar from the island, and as a result the villagers’ traditional relationship with their local wooded landscape changed irrevocably.

**Conflicting interests in the Yakusugi landscape**

The interests of the villagers in the woodland landscape unique to Yakushima, was economic to an extent, but primarily spiritual. They wanted fuelwood, fodder and fertilizer, but at the same time revered the great cedar trees as living gods and would not cut them down. The outer forest close to the villages, known locally as “maedake”, and similar in a sense to the satoyama of mainland Japan, was used for their economic needs, but for the most part, the okudake or inner forest was avoided, for these were the haunts of tree spirits (jurei) who needed to be appeased by the occasional deer hunter or pilgrim who ventured into their realm. The okudake, for the local inhabitants was a fearful place that as well as being a “sacred landscape” functioned equally for most as a landscape of exclusion. Ironically, as the Shimazu clan gradually gained hegemony over the island, this
exclusion zone, which was of the islanders own volition, became a landscape of economic exclusion over which they had no control, as Shimazu officials, coveting the cedar in the forest depths, banned locals from entering what would be come the Lord’s private domain.

Even when in the maedake other species were cut, a purifying ritual was performed before felling and which involved leaving rice, shochu and salt at the base of the tree in order to appease the mountain gods. After cutting, a prayer was recited and small branches left on the stumps to give thanks to the gods. In addition, the practice of planting new seedlings in the vicinity, stressed their gratitude and at the same time showed very early examples of afforestation, to safeguard the wooded landscape by replacing what was taken, although scholars such as Nakashima have refuted the argument that this was a direct example of forest protection, suggesting it can more easily be understood as a clear expression of the islanders spatial relationship with the wooded landscape. (Nakashima 2002). For many centuries villagers made pilgrimages into the forests and to climb the mountains, praying for health and good harvests. The cedar tree worship was a key to their wellbeing in this wooded landscape, ensuring the continuation of human interaction in the forest without disturbing the environmental balance. Berque (1997-76) has argued that “a number of religious factors contributed” to the protection of Japan’s forests, and it could be posited that this was the case on Yakushima, at least until the late sixteenth century. The habit of ‘takemairi’, religious pilgrimages into the deep forests and to the peaks of the island’s highest mountains flourished. These pilgrimages created the sense of awe in local inhabitants which prevented wide scale felling, and still take place to this day in a much reduced form. In this sense, for the villagers on Yakushima, many a great cedar, in the words of Douglas Davies, availed itself “as a historical marker and a social focus of events.” (1988-34). The most sacred of
the trees were given individual names by the locals and it is interesting to note that even today, most of the remaining giants have special titles which imbibe them with individuality, endearing them to the thousands that walk or drive into the mountains to see them each year.

Cohen has pointed out how “forests have been broadly harnessed as a powerful metaphor, and have also been linked to the development of economies and cultures.” (1999-428). At this juncture in Japanese history, the Shimazu clan insisted on their hegemony in the strict rules they began to lay down concerning the vast cedar forests they coveted. In direct contrast to the local villagers’ interpretation of the primeval forests on Yakushima, the Shimazu clan's interest was purely economic. It saw a way of harvesting vast tracts of first rate timber, and had close connections with the rapidly expanding urban centre of Osaka in particular, where high grade construction timber could be shipped in the knowledge of receiving huge financial revenue for the Satsuma fief. The contrast in interpretation of the wooded landscape between the Shimazu rulers and the local inhabitants is obvious, and historically had many precedents in diverse areas of the world where a more powerful group came across forest land it required for whatever purpose. Schama has pointed out how many civilizations have over time “defined themselves against the primeval woods”. He notes a number of examples of how the ancient forest with its cedar stands, sacred groves and impenetrable depths represented all that stood in the way of progress. On Yakushima, the long held beliefs of the local inhabitants did too, as far as Shimazu were concerned. They understood the necessity of removing what they saw as old superstitions, so that they could in Schama's phrase “pulp the wild man of the woods and make his timber into fine buildings, into towns” (1995-82). In their attempts to achieve this next step, they found in the early years of Tokugawa rule, an unlikely accomplice.
The Making of a New Landscape

By 1624, small scale felling of some cedar was taking place and Shimazu had established a monopoly on the exporting of timber coming off the island. This was accomplished by the clan through setting up a system of official ships and check points around the island. These included the ports of Miyanoura in the north, Anbo in the south east, Kurio in the south, and Nagata in the west. Although a number of different species began to be harvested, it was Yakusugi cedar which was most sought after. The reasons for this included the fact that, as it was about six times more resinous than normal sugi, it was highly resistant to decay, which was of great concern in a country where the extremes of temperature and humidity led to weaker timber becoming rotten very quickly. Shimazu clan officials understood how the durable building materials to be got from the Yakusugi could make great financial profits for the fief.

The only thing that prevented them from harvesting more quickly on a larger scale was the deeply held belief system of the islanders, who were disinclined to cut any of the larger trees which they still revered as gods. Shimazu officials, perhaps understanding the need for someone the islanders trusted more than any direct clan representative, sought out an individual who could persuade the villagers to change their ideology. Such a man appeared on the scene in the form of a Buddhist priest named Jochiku Tomari.

Jochiku Tomari, who in the literature is often referred to as the ‘yaku saint’, was born in Anbo village in the south east of the island. As the son of a local ship builder, it is likely that he came into direct contact, as a young boy, with many of the traditions closely associated with the taking of timber from the forests of his native island. After early training in the Hokke sect
of Buddhism in the local temple, he eventually left the island for many years. Having spent time in Kyoto, Osaka, Edo and the Ryukyu Kingdom (Modern day Okinawa), he was an extremely well travelled and learned man in his age, and his skills were brought to the attention of Shimazu Mitsuhisa. He was ordered to return to Kagoshima and started to serve the Shimazu clan, where his knowledge of customs on the island of Yakushima must have been very useful for those intent on exploiting the forest riches there.

According to the few available documents tracing the life of the Buddhist priest, he returned to Yakushima aged 70 in 1640 to convince the islanders that they should start felling the larger cedar trees in the okudake or inner mountains. It is not clear whether his reasons for attempting to persuade the islanders stemmed from his belief in the validity of Shimazu's claim to the timber, or whether it was done in the hope that the lives of his fellow islanders would be improved if they undertook this difficult and dangerous work on Satsuma's behalf. Certainly, it is well documented that in comparison to other islands at the time, Yakushima had little of intrinsic value to trade with other areas. Due to the poor soil and rocky terrain, rice paddies were sparse and many of the villagers struggled to produce enough to offset the heavy taxes imposed by their Shimazu lords. Perhaps Jochiku Tomari felt that it was the lesser of two evils for the islanders to toil in cutting the cedars for Shimazu in return for reduced taxation.

The legacy that he left in other spheres, such as the opening up of a waterway in Anbo village, and the planting of mulberry trees to encourage the rearing of silkworms certainly helped Jochiku Tomari earn his name in the villagers’ eyes, “the island saint”, working as an unstinting benefactor to the locals. However, a more cynical reading of events regarding the cedar forests might suggest in his work for the Shimazu, that of an unwitting pawn helping the clan to open up a trade that would create fabulous wealth
for the fiefdom with very little lost in return. Whatever the truth of the matter, after a week long pilgrimage into the mountains, Jochiku Tomari returned to announce to the villagers that he had received permission from the gods in the okudake allowing the islanders to cut down the trees without fear of reprisal. Their concerns over upsetting the deities of the forest were assuaged in what seems, from a modern perspective at least, a rather cynical attempt to maximize the tree felling possibilities without compromising the opportunity to use the local workforce that would be vital in extracting the valuable timber. Jochiku Tamari told them that “if an axe leant against a cedar tree would not fall down, the God did not dwell in that tree” (Yakushima Environmental Culture Village Centre). With immense trunks often over a metre in diameter, the likelihood was that the villager’s axe would remain upright, and felling would be acceptable. In a short space of time the cutting of the huge cedars began, and the Shimazu extended their power base deep into the wooded interior, and as trees fell and cedar was brought out on the toiling backs of the villagers, the primeval landscape started to change for ever.

From Gods to Wooden Shingles

By the mid seventeenth century Yakushima was fast catching up with the other great forest areas of Japan such as Yoshino, Owase and Kiso where the prime woodland was being cut down at great speed as demand for high quality timber for construction projects outstripped resources. As Totman notes, “by 1670 the cumulative effect of this nationwide surge in building, was massive deforestation” (1989-54).

It has been suggested that from the 1640s to the end of Tokugawa rule in 1868, that between 50-70% of all Yakusugi trees (generally designated as trees over one thousand years old) were harvested (Matsumoto 2000-47). This figure
does not tell the whole tale of the destruction of the cedar forest in the Edo period however. It has also been calculated that the majority of the younger sugi trees (kosugi) were felled and that there are now very few trees left with ages between 300-500 years old. (Nakashima 2002). When the difficulty of extracting the timber is put into the equation with the basic nature of the tools available to the villagers at the time, it is easier to understand what a gargantuan task the removal of all this timber was, considering the incredibly rugged terrain. Added to this was the fact that in all the years of Tokugawa rule the population of the whole island never exceeded more than 6 or 7,000 people, so the regular numbers of men working deep in the forest at this time could not have been particularly large.

Once Shimazu officials had secured the opening up of the okudake for felling, villagers were required to work twenty days a month in the forest, clearing, cutting and removing the cedar. The remaining ten days they were allowed to work in their villages, attending to their crops and livestock. In the steep narrow valleys of the okudake, before any large trees could be cut, it was necessary to clear a space around the giant cedars by cutting down surrounding smaller trees. Only then could the workers build a platform between four and five metres in height around the massive trunk, from which they could start to fell the immense trees. The villagers used an axe called a “kiri-yoki”, to fell smaller trees, and to make the main incisions on the large cedars before wedges called “ya” could be driven in, in order to control the direction of the tree as it fell. Once the tree was cut they used a huge two handed saw known as a “sasaba-noko” to cut the trees horizontally into round more manageable pieces. This saw, with its uniform blade was often less than perfect as sawdust with high resin content got stuck between the teeth making the process longer and more physically demanding. Other tools were used for hauling and processing the timber.
but the extreme slopes of the forest and the lack of large rivers to float the timber down, meant that the majority of the cedar was hauled out of the mountains on the backs of the villagers. The process of cutting a single tree was therefore very labour intensive and it took several days for the tree to be felled at source. It was perhaps the low level technology involved in the felling which helped the forests recover somewhat over time, rather than any premeditated attempt at protecting the forest.

Hauling out the cedar was physically exhausting work as locals had to navigate narrow paths through the forest which were steep and treacherous, due to the heavy rainfall and the twisted tree roots which covered the forest floor in a dangerous labyrinth. In the few drawings available in the literature that capture parts of this process we get a sense of the severe physical demands put on the men felling the cedars. The scene echoes Prince’s comments on Turner’s paintings of the agriculture workers in England in the late eighteenth century “It is not a pastoral idyll of rustic ease nor a celebration of happy industriousness, but an encounter with the harsh routine of work” (1988-106). Two men, heavily muscled and swinging axes on alternate sides work in unison on the high platform, dwarfed by the tree and the great tangled roots below them. The size of their task is in itself daunting. In the background, a narrow path leads away from the tree where four more figures stooped low under heavy bundles, walk with the aid of large wooden staffs, back into what looks like a darker, deeper brooding forest. The landscape drawings are constructed around the hardship of the toil involved, the result of which could only lead to the destruction of the sacred landscape.

Once the tree was cut, the platform was removed, and the men moved on to the next large cedar leaving a stump about four or five metres high. The landscape became littered with these stumps, but because of the high resin content within them, they did not decay. Newer cedar seedlings
grew onto the stumps as the forest floor was opened up to more sunlight. Regeneration occurred in the forest landscape, although some scholars have questioned the extent to which this re-growth was deliberately encouraged by the Shimazu officials at the time. Nevertheless, the result 300 years on from these events is that the old growth areas that were once decimated have now created wooded landscape as a palimpsest, where over time the development of a new forest has been imprinted upon the first. The original inscription, not wholly erased by the Edo period loggers is now a layer of cultural landscape that is visible still today. Visitors to the island come to stand in awe close to huge leftover traces of this former landscape, and the remains of huge cedars like the Wilson stump, have now become part of the next layer of this ever evolving palimpsest.

The key to extracting the cedar as smoothly as possible from the forest, and more importantly for Shimazu lords, to producing the highest financial gain from their product, was to cut the cedar at source into roof shingles, known as “hiragi”. The hiragi were highly sought after in many areas of Japan as the highly resinous tiles the cedar produced could be guaranteed to outlast other types of wooden shingles in Japan’s demanding climate. Shimazu officials opened up lucrative markets especially in the Kansai area with huge sales in Osaka. The Satsuma authorities built a warehouse at the port in Sakai, near Osaka and the wooden shingles were shipped there from Kagoshima by boat. At the same time, they also exported them unofficially to China and the Ryukyus in defiance of Tokugawa policy regarding trade with foreign domains (Nakashima 2002). This trade made the clan even greater financial profit. To the annoyance of Yakushima residents even today, the clan marketed the product as “Satsuma sugi” rather than “Yakusugi”, implying, in an early marketing ploy, that the best roof shingles came from the wooded Satsuma landscape. Yakushima as a brand was still a long way
from imposing itself at this point in time, as the Shimazu clan preserved the hegemonic control through the hiragi trade which symbolically accentuated their domination.

Throughout the Edo period the tiles became the daily currency for all on Yakushima. The island had no monetary economy as such and while it was forbidden to buy and sell them on Yakushima, the hiragi, 50 centimetres in length and 10 centimetres wide, were used as payment for land taxes by villagers. Those left over after the annual tribute was paid to Shimazu authorities were used as a bartering item to exchange for other daily necessities.

The men were required to bring out 2 bundles of these hiragi from the forest at a time on a small wooden frame they attached to their backs. Each bundle held over 100 tiles. Only straight grained trees were sought as they made the best shingles, and it has been suggested that one reason why certain huge trees like the world famous Jomonsugi survived the axe had more to do with the fact the grain was regarded as substandard, rather than the fact that they were still held in awe as the dwellings of tree spirits. Certainly, there are a number of old trees still thriving on the island today that bear the test cuts of Edo period axes, made to ascertain whether their grain was ideal for use as hiragi or not.

By the early eighteenth century the hiragi tiles were the standard item for business on the island. Records dating from a ledger published in 1728 and still surviving in the Yakusugi Museum, called the “Yakushima tegatasho-kibo-cho”, show how instrumental hiragi were in allowing the Shimazu clan to create a system designed to keep the local population under strict control, while at the same time creating a financial monopoly for the Satsuma sugi brand. At this time the standard against which all goods were valued came into general use, with one bag of rice equal to 2,310
pieces of hiragi. With over 15,000 pieces of hiragi needed to roof one average sized house of the period, the true value of this cedar commodity can be appreciated. The Shimazu clan had reduced a sacred forest landscape to one in which clan power and economic might were writ large on the new landscape of Yakushima. It was designed to exclude the local inhabitants from profit sharing, and catered for them only in terms of their value as a cheap source of labour.

By the latter part of the eighteenth century, the policy of clear cutting the primeval cedar forest and the problem of deforestation and declining resources was starting to become apparent. By 1783, the islanders were told to concentrate on fishing as an extra resource in order to assure less cedar was felled. The catching of flying fish or “tobiuo” was promoted extensively. Nakashima has suggested that the islanders preferred this less physically demanding alternative to felling cedar, and jumped at the chance to pay off their land taxes through fishing rather than logging. So much so, that by the nineteenth century, Satsuma officials were forced to levy a labour force from the mainland to help remove cedar from the okudake. By this stage, other products of worth to the Shimazu clan were also taken off the island such as turmeric, which was used as a herbal medicine, and deer hide. The realization however, that the cedar forests were rapidly disappearing was keenly felt and by 1808, the use of any yakusugi by the islanders, however small, was completely restricted. Through the last decades of the Edo period various memorandums were published intent on halting the deforestation of the okudake woodlands. As elsewhere in Japan, the planting of new trees and the rise of silviculture became paramount, as hiragi were still in great demand in the fast developing urban areas. In the Japanese towns and cities, where housing was built in extremely close proximity, fires were frequent, and so the demand for wooden shingles remained great. Fire damage in
the city meant a great pay day for those in charge of cedar supply, so the authorities were keen to replant the forest, even if it meant it had to be with fast growing sugi that would never reach the venerable ages of the trees they had already felled. At this juncture in time, Yakushima entered what Totman refers to as a “move from the traditional age of exploitative logging toward the ‘modern’ age of regenerative forestry” (1989-148).

The story of the felling of Yakushima’s cedar forests did not finish with the end of Tokugawa rule, and the relaxing of the strict regulations that the Shimazu clan had kept in place for centuries. Other problems for the woodland landscape of the island, which will be outlined in a separate paper, started to be felt by the inhabitants and the timber industry alike. The final years of the Edo period certainly marked the beginning of the end for the Shimazu monopoly on the product, and heralded the demise of the clan’s hegemony in Satsuma with the coming of the Meiji Restoration. By this time great swathes of the cedar forests had disappeared forever, and over the two centuries of exploitation, the stories of most of those who set about the process of altering the woodland landscape of Yakushima, both villagers and Satsuma officials alike, had vanished with the trees.

Conclusion

Crang has noted how “landscapes can be engineered, their culture commodified for financial gain.” (1998-116). This is exactly what took place on Yakushima during the Edo period as the Shimazu fief extended its hegemony over the island, and in doing so help re-engineer the landscape from that of the sacred to one of power and exclusion where the product, in the form of cedar, was re-invented as Satsuma sugi hiragi tiles and used for immense financial gain.

While the clan benefited greatly, it is less easy to see how the felling
of the cedar affected the lives of the local inhabitants in such a positive light. It has been suggested that by cutting the forests, the villagers at least had something of value to trade on an island that gave poor returns in rice planting compared to other districts in Satsuma. However, had the stranglehold of the Shimazu clan on their livelihoods not been so tight in the first place and had the annual taxes levied against the population not been so high, the inhabitants may not have found it necessary to fell their sacred forests.

By being persuaded to do so from 1640 onwards, they inadvertently triggered the start of deforestation on the island, so that Yakushima mirrored identically areas on the mainland where in Totman’s words “a military dictatorship of unparalleled power reimposed order on the country and precipitated a nationwide surge of deforestation” (1989-174). The Shimazu clan, by harvesting up to 70% of the old growth cedar forests did likewise on Yakushima, and while late Edo period planting took place and forests re-established themselves to an extent, the old growth wooded landscape that the inhabitants of Yakushima had kept guarded and sacred for centuries was all but lost. What remains today of the cedar forest is now protected, but concerns from various groups still exist as to the sustainable future of the wooded landscape and as further papers in this series will point out, the lessons to be learned from what took place on Yakushima in the Edo period may still need heeding.
Bibliography


Yakushima Environmental Culture Village Centre “Exhibition Hall Guide”