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Historical Anthropology and the Field of Japan

Key words: Historical Anthropology 歴史人類学(Historical Study in Anthropology), Historical Folklore 歴史民俗学, New History 新しい歴史 (Ecole des Annales, Annales School アナール派), Comparative Folklore 比較民俗学, Folk Belief 民間信仰(Folk Religion 民俗宗教), Modern 近代(Modernism, Modernization)

Since April 2002, I have been conducting a long-term fieldwork and follow-up fieldwork at Nijo-machi 二丈町, Itoshima-gun 糸島郡, Fukuoka Prefecture 福岡県, Japan 日本, as well as Ikisan-koku 一貴山校区 (school district or elementary school catchment area) that belongs to Nijo-machi. The objective of my Ph.D. thesis, currently being written based on the results of these fieldworks, is to critically study the assertions made in previous Japanese folklore studies and anthropological research on Japan by overseas researchers (which have not adequately considered the relationship between specific folk beliefs and modernism in local communities), and to re-examine the concept of ‘folk belief’ that was created within the framework of Japanese modernism.

This research aims to clarify the relationship between the domain of ‘folk belief’ practice and ‘modernism’ from the field of contemporary Japanese villages, and to re-examine the concept of ‘folk belief’ that has a history of just over 100 years. It will combine the approaches of historical anthropology within anthropology and historical folklore within Japanese folklore studies, and will attempt to reconcile their respective advantages and disadvantages. I tentatively name this method ‘historical anthropology – folklore 歴史人類学・民俗学’, in line with the tasks of this research.

First of all, I will briefly introduce Nijo-machi and Ikisan-koku, the area of this research. Next, I will explain why a historical anthropology – folklore approach is indispensable for this research, using fieldwork experience and case studies. Finally, the method of ‘historical anthropology – folklore’ used in this research will be presented by outlining the debate so far concerning historical anthropology and historical folklore. Specifically, this will involve an overview of theoretical development concerning historical research on anthropology and Japanese historical folklore.