

The Inheritance of Land and Social Organization in a Southern
Kantō Village during the Seventeenth Century

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From the late sixteenth century to the seventeenth century, Japan faced an epic turning point in history. Although there are different views on how to evaluate this turning point, many scholars maintain that feudalism was established during this transformation. It is held that the cause of feudalism was *Taikō-Kenchī* (the Taikō's land-survey), a systematic survey of the land throughout Japan carried out by Toyotomi Hideyoshi which was continued by Tokugawa Ieyasu.

This land-survey and institutional changes brought about by a policy for the self-support of peasants promoted the spread of *Shōnō* (small peasant); in the later seventeenth century Japanese villages were composed and *Nengu* (land taxes) were collected from them. This was the theory accepted by many Japanese historians 20 years ago. But there are many uncertainties.

First the definition of *Shōnō* (small peasant) is obscure. What kind of peasant were they? Generally *Shōnō* were regarded as the equivalent to small scale peasants and understood as a form of family. The problem lies in whether this conception is plausible. Didn't extended families exist?

Second, the process by which *Shōnō* became independent cultivators is unclear. Two processes have been considered. Slaves gained control of land and became *Shōnō*. Another theory states that extended families split into small families that became *Shōnō*. The majority of scholars maintain that the process in which slaves turned into *Shōnō* was most common.

Finally, the social relations and social organization of the developing *Shōnō* are unknown. There has been scarcely any study of this theme, and many studies presuppose that *Dozoku* existed, as has been traditionally maintained.

This paper is a partial study of those themes and focuses on Nagata village in southern Kantō District. The results are as follows:

1 During the sixteenth century, there were 30 units consisting of peasants who controlled slaves, independents and peasants who were dependent upon powerful peasants. After the land-survey they were defined as holding the same status.

2 During the seventeenth century *Ie* (family) became independent through the equal partition of land, and the number of *Ie* increased. In the late seventeenth century, the number is estimated to have been 60, after which this figure remained almost the same.

3 Inheritance based on the equal partition of land was observed on each piece of land and this resulted in the possession of pieces of land by several owners.

4 When the formation of new *Ie* took place, land was equally divided. There was no dominant or subordinate relationship like *Honke* (stem family) and *Bunke* (branch family). The village functioned as a comparatively equal organization of the peasants.