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Changes in Land Tenure Patterns in Micronesian Society

メタデータ	言語: English 出版者: 公開日: 2015-11-18 キーワード: 作成者: 須藤, 健一 メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10502/5150

VI. Changes in Land Tenure Patterns in Micronesian Society

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Micronesian islands (except Gilbert and Nauru) have been governed by Spain, Germany, Japan, and United States of America since the 17th century. By the autumn of 1986, however, they will escape from the political standpoint as a The Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands and then Federated States of North Mariana, Republic of Belau, Federated States of Micronesia and Republic of Marshall Islands will be born. In these countries, there have been remarkable social and cultural changes influenced by the government of foreign powers over 300 years. Concept and tenure pattern of the subsistence economy (land tenure pattern), which is the living basis of the people in Micronesia, show a new phase different from the traditional systems. The purpose of this report is to clarify the changes in the land tenure pattern in Micronesia for these 100 years.

As factors that gave a serious influence on the changes in the land tenure patterns in Micronesia. (1) Policy of the governing country, (2) intrusion of monetary economy, (3) increase in population, and (4) natural disaster can be cited.

(1) Land policies of the dominating countries

Germany and Japan positively progressed the land reforms in their domination eras. The purpose of Germany was to secure the lands for copra plantations and that of Japan was to supply farmlands to Japanese farming emigrates. Germany marked out the lands to be owned by the people of the island especially in Ponape Island to enclose the government-owned lands and assigned the land to adult men and issued land stamps. This project was enforced in 1912 and is still now continued. As the result, the traditional system of Ponape as co-ownership of matrilineal descent group (matrilineal inheritance) has changed at present to individual ownership of adult men (inheritance from father to son).

In the Japanese domination era, the South Sea Agency carried out land surveys in the principal islands including Saipan, Palau, Yap, Truk, and Ponape and forfeited every land owned in common among inhabitants of a village as "government-owned land". Then completed the survey of inhabitant-owned lands by 1938 and prepared a "Tochi Daicho" (land register) to which the name of the owner or manager, classification of land category, and area for each section of land are entered. Because the names entered to the land register at that time were chiefs of matrilineal descent group or men of importance, there are many contentious

cases at present to determine whether the land concerned is owned by the descent group or an individual. Such problems were aroused because the South Sea Agency registered the lands in the Japanese manner without fully understanding the matrilineal society. Then, at present, the agnatic descendants of the holder of the title deed come to claim the ownership of the land strongly.

(2) Intrusion of monetary economy

German and British copra trading merchants began purchases of copra with cash in the Micronesian area in the latter half of the 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, a new situation, where people of Micronesia having cash purchase the lands, was aroused. This trend is remarkable in Truk and its satellite islands, in particular, where lands have been the object of sale and purchase and such a state, where the rich people occupy the lands, is still continuing today. Sale and purchase of lands gave birth to a complete private ownership of lands and thus brought about a new land tenure pattern. At present, purchase of lands by cash is made also in Palau and Ponape Islands partially.

(3) Fine division of lands due to increase in population

The population of the Micronesian islands had steeply decreased by 1950 since the era under domination of Spain. In Yap, the population that counted 40,000 in 1800 has decreased to one tenth. Since the American domination, however, steep increase in younger generations is brought about due to promotion of expansion of the education system (supply of school lunch) and medical and health facilities, and propagation of Christianity. This increase in population

has gave serious influence on the land tenure pattern in those coral islands, in particular, where food resource is scarce. In coral islands, the land has been commonly owned by the matrilineal descent group and such a custom, in which part of the land is given from the father to son or make the son to inherit it, had been established. Due to increase in younger population in recent years, however, the number of cases where the lands are distributed from the father to sons have increased resulting in decrease or vanishing of lands that are common property of a descent group.

(4) Changes in land tenure due to natural disasters

Anybody living in a flat coral island has such an experience that the island was covered by water due to attack of a typhoon. Although it is possible to continue to live in the island owing to the supply of aid in recent years, people at that time were obliged to move to a volcanic island until the beginning of the 20th century. A typhoon that attacked the satellite islands of Mokil and Pingerap in the middle of the 19th century destroyed three fourth of the population. Therefore, lands were distributed to the surviving male adults in these two islands. Although lands had been owned by matrilineal descent groups and a matrilineal inheritance system had been adopted before that time, after the redistribution, however, the land of both societies have come to be owned by agnatic families and be inherited agnatically until today.

As described in the above, the land tenure pattern in Micronesia has changed from co-ownership of matrilineal descent groups to that of matri-stem family and further

to that of agnatic family in these 100 years. The trend is expected to continue in the future also.