

The wisdom of a forgotten architecture may hold a clue to the future of civilization.

A Civilization Beneath the Thatched Roof

A Japanese Thatcher's View of Nature, Community, and Civilization

Haruo Nishio

Miyama, Kyoto, Japan

Table of Contents

■ Preface	
Why a Japanese Thatcher Is Writing About Civilization	3
■ Chapter 1	
The History of Japanese Thatching	4
■ Chapter 2	
Thatched Houses as Sacred Architecture	6
■ Chapter 3	
Ise Shrine: A Thirteen-Century Tradition	7
■ Chapter 4	
Japanese Mythology and the Daijōsai Ritual	8
■ Chapter 5	
Rice and the Philosophy of Coexistence	11
■ Chapter 6	
Village Cooperative Systems	
Tanomoshikō, Yui, and an Analogue Blockchain	15
■ Chapter 7	
Modernization and the Decline of Thatching	18
■ Chapter 8	
Beyond Money: The Wisdom of the Thatched Roof	22
■ Afterword	24
■ About the Author	26

Preface

Why a Japanese Thatcher Is Writing About Civilization

There are many artisans in the world, yet most of them do not speak very much.

This is because they understand the limits of language.

The world they explore is one that cannot easily be expressed in words.

Because of this, they often feel the difficulty of trying to describe it with language.

Jesus Christ and the Buddha did not write books.

The Bible and the sutras were written by their disciples.

Perhaps the Buddha and Jesus Christ also understood the limits of language.

Words try to fix things in place.

Yet both the world we perceive and we ourselves are impermanent and constantly changing.

Even so, I will attempt to speak to you, through words, about Japanese thatching.

But even if I were to write tens of thousands of pages, it would still be difficult to fully convey it to you.

In the end, I will probably feel frustrated that I could not fully express it.

Yet if something in these words allows you to feel even a small part of that world, it means that a vast realm exists beyond them.

From that point on, you can only understand it through your five senses — and perhaps what could be called a sixth sense.

And when that moment comes, you may feel that this is something worth being born to discover.

Why did the Japanese people once build so many beautiful thatched houses?

My long journey of exploration began with that single question.

The more I learn, the more my heart becomes filled with excitement.

What an extraordinary history we possess.

What remarkable ideas our ancestors lived by and left for us, their descendants.

All I can do is help guide you toward that world.

And if you find that you cannot understand my writing at all, please do not be discouraged.

It is not because there is something wrong with you.

It is because I am attempting to express with words something that cannot truly be expressed in words.

Chapter 1

The History of Japanese Thatching

This chapter traces the origins of thatched roofs in Japan, from prehistoric dwellings to the communal systems that once sustained village life, and finally to the rapid social changes that led to their decline.

Origins in Prehistoric Life

The origins of thatched roofs are too ancient to know with certainty.

However, the act of making roofs from grass is common throughout the world, and it must have begun when human beings first left caves and started building shelters for themselves.

In Japan, primitive dwellings known as pit houses have been excavated from archaeological sites dating back about sixteen thousand years.

People dug slightly into the ground, set wooden posts into the soil, and thatched the roof with grass.

There is also a theory that soil was sometimes placed on top of the thatch.

A fire was placed at the center of the building.

In prehistoric times, the Japanese lived in such structures in communities based mainly on hunting and gathering.

It is often said that for more than ten thousand years people lived in a peaceful society that coexisted with nature.

The Japanese sensitivity toward nature continues from those ancient times.

Even today, thatched **kominka** always contain an *irori*, a sunken hearth.

This reflects the ancient pattern of life in which the fire at the center formed the heart of the dwelling.

Rice cultivation is believed to have begun in Japan about 2,300 years ago.

In Japan, roof shapes tend to be similar within each region.

The original form may lie in the prehistoric pit dwelling.

Modern **kominka** resemble pit houses with pillars added above ground.

As agricultural society developed, civilization gradually became more complex.

However, ordinary people did not yet live in the large and solid thatched houses we see today.

Most likely they lived in simple and modest structures.

About five hundred years ago, Japan entered the period known as the Sengoku era, when regional warlords fought over territory.

At that time many people who had concentrated in cities dispersed into the mountains across the country because of the danger of attack and shortages of supplies.

Warriors who lost battles in particular formed villages deep in the countryside.

Water could be obtained in these mountainous regions.

During this period, the mountain villages that are now scattered throughout Japan were formed.

In 1603, Tokugawa Ieyasu unified the country, and a period of peace lasting about 260 years began.

Even so, people suffered repeated famines and natural disasters, and ordinary villagers must have lived modest lives.

Chapter 2

Thatched Houses as Sacred Architecture

This chapter explores a distinctive idea in Japanese culture: the traditional thatched house was not built primarily for human comfort, but as a sacred structure where humans lived alongside the presence of spirits and ancestors.

The Form of Thatching Around the World

Because thatch is a soft and flexible material, it can be shaped into many different forms.

In countries such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and South Africa, one can see a wide variety of thatched houses.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that almost every roof is different.

In the Netherlands in particular, contemporary architects have embraced the artistic potential of thatch and are experimenting with bold and innovative designs.

However, when you come to Japan, the situation is very different.

Although there are variations from region to region, within each region the roof design is generally the same.

In the Kinki region, where we live, almost all thatched houses use the **irimoya-style roof**.

This raises an interesting question.

If thatch is such a flexible material, why do Japanese thatched houses follow such fixed forms?

The reason is that the roof expresses **status and spiritual meaning**, and it has a deep relationship with Shinto.

A House Built for the Gods

To put it simply, buildings known as kominka were not originally built for people to live in.

Modern people generally assume that houses are built for human comfort.

But traditional Japanese people did not think in this way.

The traditional house functioned as a kind of **sacred shrine-like architecture**.

People did not occupy the best room in the house for themselves.

The brightest room with the best sunlight was called the **zashiki**, yet the owner of the house did not normally use this room.

Instead, it was considered a sacred space for **spirits and ancestors**.

Weddings and funerals were held inside the house, and during those occasions the **zashiki** served as the central ceremonial space.

Meanwhile, the family slept together in a smaller and darker room located behind it.

In other words, it would be more accurate to say that people were **only temporary lodgers within a sacred structure**.

As I will explain later, traditional Japanese people did not believe that human beings were the only presence existing in this world.

Chapter 3

Ise Shrine: A Thirteen-Century Tradition

This chapter introduces Ise Shrine, one of the most important sacred sites in Japan, where the tradition of rebuilding thatched structures every twenty years has continued for more than thirteen centuries.

The Tradition of Shikinen Sengu

Ise Shrine carries out a ritual known as **Shikinen Sengu**, in which the shrine buildings are completely rebuilt every twenty years.

This ceremony has been performed **62 times**, preserving the thatched form of the shrine for more than **1,330 years**.

Modern people often try to construct permanent buildings using stone, steel, or concrete.

However, these materials are ultimately finite.

The Idea of Eternity Through Renewal

If there is sunlight, soil, wind, and water, thatch and timber can be produced again every year.

Even if these natural materials decay, they can be replaced with newly grown materials, allowing the cycle to continue.

Within this cycle lies the possibility of **true continuity and eternity**.

Chapter 4

Japanese Mythology and the Daijōsai Ritual

This chapter introduces the spiritual worldview found in Japanese mythology and explains how it is expressed through sacred architecture, especially through the thatched ritual structures built for the imperial Daijōsai ceremony.

Japanese Mythology and the World of Spirits

To speak about thatched architecture in Japan, it is necessary to introduce Japanese mythology.

In Japan there are many unique beings known as **kami** — spiritual presences believed to dwell within nature.

In Japanese mythology, these kami often appear in many stories in anthropomorphic form.

For people who come from monotheistic traditions, this worldview may be difficult to understand.

However, the word *kami* in Japan carries a meaning closer to **spirits** than to a single supreme god.

For this reason, in the explanation that follows, I will use the word **spirit**.

In Japanese mythology, there were originally spirits called **Kunitsu-kami**, who governed the earthly world.

Later, heavenly spirits known as **Amatsu-kami** descended from the heavens and decided to govern the earth.

The Kunitsu-kami then yielded the earth to them.

This symbolic event is known as “**the transfer of the land**” (**Kuniyuzuri**).

The representative deity among the Amatsu-kami is the sun goddess **Amaterasu Ōmikami**, and the Emperor of Japan is believed to be her descendant.

The **Inner Shrine of Ise (Naikū)** is dedicated to Amaterasu Ōmikami.

The Daijōsai Ritual

When a new Emperor ascends the throne, two sacred thatched buildings are constructed.

They are called **Yukiden** and **Sukiden**.

The ritual known as the **Daijōsai** is not simply a harvest festival.

It is a ceremony in which the new Emperor becomes united with Amaterasu as her descendant.

In other words, it is not merely a political ceremony.

It is a **ritual reenactment of mythology**.

At the center of this ceremony stand the two buildings, Yukiden and Sukiden.

After the ritual is completed, both buildings are immediately dismantled.

For this reason, few Japanese people are even aware that these structures exist.

Why Are These Buildings Made with Thatch?

Why did these sacred buildings need to be constructed with thatch?

There is no clear historical answer.

However, my own interpretation is as follows.

When the heavenly spirits decided to govern the earth and the earthly spirits yielded it to them, the heavenly spirits had two possible choices.

One choice would have been to rule the earth according to the laws of heaven — to dominate and conquer it.

The other choice was to respect the rules and laws of the earth itself, and to relate to the world with humility.

The heavenly spirits chose the latter.

Building structures using materials that originate from the earth itself — wood and thatch, which are the remains of plants — symbolizes respect for the natural laws of the earth.

The heavenly spirits then brought rice to the land prepared by the Kunitsu-kami, and together they sought to develop the world further in harmony.

In this vision, the Kunitsu-kami and the Amatsu-kami do not defeat one another.

Instead, they **overlap and coexist**.

The Meaning of Thatch in Japanese Architecture

The fact that the Yukiden and Sukiden are newly constructed each time an Emperor ascends the throne reflects the deeper meaning of thatched architecture in Japan.

Perhaps the reason that thatched buildings spread so widely throughout Japan was that ordinary people, not only the Emperor, also shared this mythological worldview.

They believed that by respecting the rules of the earth and allowing spirits to coexist harmoniously, human life could continue to develop.

Earlier I said that **kominka are sacred shrine-like architecture**.

The world, in this view, exists through the activity of many different spirits.

People expressed their gratitude for this by building sacred thatched structures.

These structures were places where families and spirits could exist together, and where people could pray.

The Silence of Thatched Space

There is another characteristic of thatched houses.

Even when rain falls, the roof makes almost no sound.

Mobile phone signals sometimes have difficulty reaching such buildings.

It may even be possible that thatched structures soften or absorb invisible waves such as sound, radio signals, or electromagnetic fields.

Perhaps thatch was necessary in order to create a space of complete stillness, where the Emperor and the spirits could confront one another in a pure state.

When the present Emperor ascended the throne in 2019 during the **Enthronement of Emperor Naruhito**, the Yukiden and Sukiden were again constructed.

However, on that occasion they were built with wooden shingles rather than thatch.

The reason is unknown, but for those of us in the thatching profession it was deeply disappointing.

Our entire industry had prepared for the possibility of participating in the project, yet in the end we were not called.

Chapter 5

Rice and the Philosophy of Coexistence

This chapter explores how rice cultivation, mythology, and personal experience reveal a deeper Japanese worldview: a philosophy of coexistence between humans, nature, and the many spirits believed to inhabit the world.

The Mythological Origin of Rice

For the Japanese people, rice has always been something special.

There is a myth that rice was brought down from heaven.

According to Japanese mythology, the sun goddess **Amaterasu Ōmikami** cultivated rice in the heavenly realm.

She then sent her grandson **Ninigi-no-Mikoto** to the earth and entrusted him with bringing rice to humanity.

For this reason, rice has never been regarded simply as a crop created by human beings.

Many Japanese people believe that rice is a gift from the spirits.

Because of this belief, rituals of gratitude were always performed before planting rice and after harvesting it.

Rice was offered to the spirits as a sign of thanks.

In this mythological worldview, the **Kunitsu-kami**, the spirits of the land, prepared the earth itself, while the **Amatsu-kami**, the heavenly spirits, brought rice cultivation.

Together, these spirits worked to make the earthly world prosperous.

There is another myth in which a spirit dies, and from its body various foods are born.

In this story, rice and other grains originate from the body of a spirit.

This expresses the idea that rice is not merely food but something received from the spirits — in a sense, even **the spirit itself**.

In many rituals, rice and food are first offered to the spirits, and then people eat the offerings together.

By sharing the food in this way, people believe they become united with the spirits.

My Own Experience Growing Rice

I myself have been cultivating rice for ten years.

While observing rice plants, I began to notice something interesting.

Rice does not seem to compete with other plants.

Especially underground, where roots spread through the soil, rice does not struggle aggressively

against neighboring plants.

Instead, it appears to coexist with them.

Because of this nature, if we want rice to grow large and produce abundant grain, humans must remove the surrounding weeds.

As I watched this process, I felt that rice resembles the character of the Japanese people who eat it.

Japanese people tend not to push others aside in order to stand out.

Instead, they often prefer harmony and cooperation with those around them.

I began to wonder whether this temperament might be related to the rice that has sustained Japanese life for centuries.

Perhaps the nature of what we eat influences the nature of the beings who eat it.

If rice truly came from the spirits, then perhaps rice carries within it a message about how human beings can live peacefully on this earth.

Thinking about it this way feels deeply mysterious.

Are Humans Originally from Earth?

Earlier I mentioned the myth that heavenly spirits brought rice to the earth.

But this raises another question.

Were human beings themselves originally born from the earth?

Japanese mythology does not clearly state the answer.

However, I sometimes feel that humans may not originally belong to this planet.

This is not something that can be explained logically.

It is simply an intuition.

Why must we eat every day?

Why must we sleep?

Can anyone explain this completely?

Scientists would say that eating maintains the body and sleeping allows the body to rest.

But if human beings were truly born from the earth and were simply part of it, perhaps we would be able to exist without eating or sleeping — like plants.

Plants appear to be truly native to the earth.

They can exist simply by standing on the ground.

Plants are also connected to one another as part of the earth itself.

They seem to share a network of knowledge.

The grass in my garden knows how the oak tree in your garden feels today.

Human beings, in contrast, have been trying to construct something similar to that plant network outside their own bodies.

The internet is one example.

Yet human beings still struggle to understand the earth itself.

Do you know how the earth feels today?

Let me return to the main point.

If human beings did in fact come from somewhere beyond this planet — and again, this is only my intuitive speculation — then we have two possible choices.

One choice would be to conquer the earth and dominate it according to our own human ways.

The other choice is the one represented by the heavenly spirits in Japanese mythology:

to respect the laws and rules of the earth, to try to understand them, and to live humbly in harmony with the planet.

The people of old Japan chose the latter.

By building houses with materials that are the remains of plants — wood, bamboo, and thatch — they sought to become one with the earth like plants themselves, and to join the natural network of life.

The earth operates according to many rules and principles.

One of these principles is **giving**.

Human beings must eat every day.

Simply by living, we must take food from the earth.

Yet the earth continues to give to us.

The sun also continues to give endlessly.

Giving is one of the fundamental principles of life on this planet.

People in old Japan tried to become beings who also give.

Another fundamental rule of the earth is **circulation**.

Thatched roofs eventually decay.

This is because the earth operates according to cycles.

Giving and circulation are closely related.

By giving, circulation is created.

The rebuilding of Ise Shrine every twenty years also follows this principle of circulation.

The blessings of the sun allow plants to grow, and through those blessings the shrine buildings can be renewed again and again.

Life itself follows the same rule.

Because new life is given, death also exists.

People in old Japan likely understood human death in this way — as part of the same cycle.

In this way, earlier generations of Japanese people adapted themselves honestly to the natural laws of the earth.

Today, however, we often see the opposite tendency.

Are we trying to dominate the earth according to human desires and make everything permanent?

Chapter 6

Village Cooperative Systems

Tanomoshikō, Yui, and an Analogue Blockchain

This chapter explains the social system that allowed thatched houses to spread throughout Japan. Long before modern finance or digital networks existed,

village communities developed their own decentralized systems for sharing resources and labor.

The Emergence of a Village-Based Support System

Around the year 1700, thatched houses began to increase rapidly throughout Japan.

This sudden spread was made possible by a system developed within village communities — a method for lending and borrowing both materials and labor.

I often describe this as **an analogue form of blockchain**.

(For a detailed explanation, please see the video linked here.)

<https://www.haruonishio.com/portfolio/long-ago-the-people-of-miyama-had-already-developed-a-blockchain-system/>

In a typical village, around thirty households formed a cooperative group.

Each household contributed materials such as thatch harvested from fields, bamboo, and rice-straw ropes that were handmade during the winter.

These materials were lent to whichever household needed to repair or replace its roof.

The household repairing its roof would then hire professional thatchers using the materials gathered from the community.

Village members also provided labor for many tasks that did not require professional skills: carrying bundles of thatch, cutting materials, cleaning, or transporting old thatch away.

Each household kept a ledger.

When materials or labor were lent, the lending household recorded it.

When materials were borrowed, the borrowing household also recorded the amount received.

Later, when the lending household needed to replace its roof, the debt had to be repaid in the same form.

Money did not play any role in these exchanges.

The entire system depended on trust among villagers, which allowed materials and labor to be mobilized whenever needed.

Yui and Tanomoshikō

In Shirakawa-go, a famous village known internationally, this cooperative system was called “**Yui.**”

In Miyama, where I live, the same system was called “**Tanomoshikō.**”

It continued to function until about forty years ago.

The origins of this system may go back roughly five hundred years.

During the Sengoku period, when people dispersed into mountain villages and began clearing land for settlement, mutual assistance must have been essential for survival.

Over time, the same system was applied not only to roof thatching but also to agriculture and forestry, allowing village life to develop and stabilize.

A Decentralized Society Built on Trust

One remarkable feature of this system was that **there was no central authority managing it.**

Everyone in the community was equal.

I often say that Japan was not built by kings or warlords.

Rather, it was formed by countless small villages of around one hundred people each, where strong relationships of trust developed among the villagers.

Through systems like this analogue blockchain, resources and labor were continuously invested in the community.

The relationship between rulers and subjects was not the defining structure of society.

Instead, people maintained relationships based on relative equality.

Even today, traces of this mentality remain in Japanese culture.

Many Japanese people feel uncomfortable receiving help without offering something in return.

There is a strong sense that favors must be repaid.

For example, at weddings or funerals, it is customary to give money as a gift.

However, the host often returns roughly half of the amount.

Practices like these reflect the long history of a society built upon mutual obligation and balanced relationships.

Over centuries, this mindset became deeply ingrained in Japanese culture.

Chapter 7

Modernization and the Decline of Thatching

This chapter explains how modernization transformed Japanese society and gradually dismantled the communal systems that had supported thatched-roof culture for centuries.

The Peak of Thatching Culture

Around the year 1850, the number of thatched houses in Japan reached its peak.

It is said that there were several hundred thousand such houses across the country.

During the Age of Exploration, **Marco Polo** described Japan in his book *The Travels of Marco Polo* (1298) as **Cipangu**, a land rich in gold where even buildings appeared golden.

One interpretation suggests that this impression may have come from the countless houses with **wheat straw thatched roofs** that already existed at the time.

Seen from ships approaching the islands, the roofs shining under the sun may have appeared golden.

This suggests that thatching culture had already been widespread in Japan for centuries.

(Unfortunately, **wheat straw thatched roofs** have now disappeared in Japan.)

Many of the thatched houses still seen in Miyama today were built between about **150 and 200 years ago**, during the period when thatching culture was at its peak.

The Transformation of Japanese Society

Around **1960**, Japanese society began to change dramatically.

The monetary economy spread rapidly, and the period of high economic growth began.

Earlier, I explained that villages had developed something like **an analogue blockchain system**.

This system did not rely on money, yet it allowed communities to build trust and concentrate materials and labor when necessary.

However, money itself was an even more revolutionary invention.

Through money, people could exchange value with others living on the other side of the world.

At the same time, industrialization and the development of petroleum-based materials created an era of unprecedented material prosperity.

Village life also changed.

In the past, villagers had sustained themselves through agriculture and forestry.

But gradually, in order to earn money, people needed to work for companies.

As a result, the shared rhythm of village life began to disappear.

People's daily schedules and lifestyles diverged, and the analogue blockchain system that had once supported the community ceased to function.

The Disappearance of the Thatching System

During this same period, a new construction method spread throughout Japan.

Instead of replacing a thatched roof, people began covering it with **corrugated metal sheets**, an industrial product.

This method was inexpensive and required little maintenance.

Young thatchers in their twenties and thirties quickly understood the direction society was taking.

Almost all of them left the profession and became company employees.

The thatch fields on the slopes of the mountains around each village were also transformed.

Instead of growing thatch grass, people planted **cedar trees**, because forestry offered a more reliable source of income.

Young people raised in mountain villages left for the cities in their teenage years to receive education and become company workers.

For nearly **eighty years**, rural mountain regions have continued to lose their younger generations.

As a result, depopulation and aging have become severe problems.

As society became centered on money, the communal structures that had supported thatched roofs collapsed.

Across Japan, the number of thatched houses has continued to decline.

The True Reason Thatching Became Expensive

My own master was born in **1932**.

In his generation, a thatcher only needed to own his tools.

Materials were gathered by the house owner through the community network of lending and borrowing.

Labor was also organized by the owner, who asked neighbors in the village for help.

However, my generation changed this system.

We began providing both materials and labor as professional contractors.

Today, when a homeowner repairs a thatched roof, **the entire cost must be paid with money.**

If we convert all the labor that was once provided by the community into monetary value, the cost becomes extremely high.

In Japan today, people often say that thatched roofs disappeared simply because they are too expensive.

This explanation is partly true.

But the real reason is different.

Thatched roofs did not suddenly become expensive.

In the past, people had developed ingenious ways to maintain them without spending large amounts of money.

What disappeared was **the social structure that supported those methods.**

The rapid pace of economic and social change also contributed to this transformation.

Japan and Britain: Different Paths of Modernization

In Britain, many old thatched houses still survive.

Some are maintained by private owners, and many others are protected by organizations such as **the National Trust**, which was founded about 150 years ago.

Today, more than **five million members** support the preservation of historic buildings and landscapes throughout Britain.

Since the Industrial Revolution began about **260 years ago**, Britain has undergone modernization and industrialization gradually over a long period of time.

While transforming society, there was still enough time to preserve older traditions and allow them to coexist with new systems.

Japan followed a different path.

Using Britain as a model, Japan transformed its entire society in **about fifty years**.

In order to achieve such rapid change, many older systems had to be abandoned.

The Loss of Cultural Awareness

As the world entered an age of material prosperity, modern Japanese people gradually lost the ability to understand the beautiful relationship with the earth that existed behind the culture of thatched roofs.

Rapid social change also produced another consequence.

Many Japanese people came to assume that **preserving culture is primarily the responsibility of the government**.

Unlike in Britain, there is relatively little tradition of citizens themselves protecting national heritage.

Japan is actually a very fortunate country.

Throughout its long history, Japan has been occupied by another nation only once.

When a country is occupied, the invading power often destroys or erases its culture first.

Because Japan has rarely experienced this, many Japanese people do not fully understand what it means to lose cultural identity.

In contrast, many people on the Asian continent have experienced this repeatedly throughout history.

For that reason, they are often very sensitive to the disappearance of culture.

Ironically, it is often people from overseas who recognize the beauty and value of Japan's traditions.

That recognition from abroad is my only hope.

Chapter 8

Beyond Money: The Wisdom of the Thatched Roof

The invention of the automobile was revolutionary.

Today, cars run on electricity without relying on oil.

But in the past, vehicles even ran on charcoal.

If we compare the invention of modern money to a gasoline-powered car, the communal systems once created by villagers can be compared to charcoal-powered vehicles — an older model of technology.

However, if the day comes when oil is exhausted, the knowledge behind charcoal-powered vehicles may become valuable again.

The development of money has been a remarkable invention.

It has allowed human activity to expand across the entire globe.

Through money, people can exchange value even with someone living on the other side of the earth.

Yet money is not a perfect system.

It functions within a delicate balance.

Money can concentrate wealth.

It tends to reduce all value to a single measure.

It encourages short-term profit.

It can become detached from real substance.

And it often amplifies human desire.

Moreover, the system of money is closely tied to the existence of the nation-state.

If people around the world begin to question whether a nation-state is truly necessary for human happiness, the monetary system itself may begin to lose its foundation.

I personally believe that human beings do not need a nation-state in order to live. A family and a village of about one hundred people are enough. I explain this idea in more detail in

“About Miyama” :<https://www.haruoishio.com/about-miyama/>

When humanity eventually creates a system that goes beyond money and moves to the next stage of civilization, I believe the world will need to learn from the wisdom that the Japanese people cultivated over many centuries.

One symbol of that wisdom is the Japanese **thatched roof**.

A thatched roof is not merely an old building technique.

It embodies a philosophy.

It represents living with nature.

Giving rather than taking.

Participating in cycles rather than resisting them.

And sustaining life through community.

These ideas were expressed in physical form through the architecture of thatched houses.

I have spent more than thirty years working as a thatcher.

Yet today, thatched houses in Japan are disappearing rapidly.

For this reason, I began doing more than simply repairing roofs.

I started purchasing disappearing thatched houses, restoring them, and creating places where people from around the world can stay and experience them.

In these houses, people from different countries gather.

They share the same roof.

They share meals.

They sit together around the same fire.

Through this simple experience, people can quietly encounter the relationship with the earth that gave birth to the thatched house.

I believe this is a small experiment for the civilization of the future.

If humanity is to create a society once again that lives in harmony with nature, supports one another, and learns to give rather than merely take, the hints for such a future already exist somewhere on this planet.

The thatched roofs that remain in the mountain villages of Japan may be one of those hints.

Thatching is not a relic of the past.

It may be a blueprint for a future civilization.

Afterword

If you have read this far, I would like to thank you.

The ideas written in these pages are not theories that I learned in books.

They are ideas I have gradually discovered through more than thirty years of working as a thatcher in a small mountain village in Japan.

During that time, I have seen many thatched houses disappear.

Villages have become quiet.

The fields where thatch once grew have turned into cedar plantations.

The knowledge that sustained these roofs for centuries is slowly fading.

Sometimes I feel the limits of what one person can do.

Repairing roofs alone cannot save a culture.

Yet at the same time, I have also come to understand something important.

Cultures do not survive because one person protects them.

They survive when people, often far away, begin to care about them.

For this reason, I began restoring old thatched houses and opening them to visitors from around the world.

When people from different countries sit together beneath a thatched roof, share a meal, and spend time around the fire, something quiet begins to happen.

They start to feel a different relationship with the earth.

It is not something that can be explained only with words.

It is something that must be experienced.

Perhaps the ideas written in this book are not really about thatched roofs.

Perhaps they are about a question that concerns all of us.

How should human beings live on this earth?

For many centuries, people in Japan searched for their own answer to that question.

The thatched roof was one expression of that answer.

Today, those roofs are disappearing.

But if the ideas behind them are understood and shared, perhaps they will not disappear entirely.

If something in these pages has spoken to you, then this story is no longer only mine.

It has already become part of yours.

And if one day you find yourself sitting beneath a thatched roof somewhere in the mountains of Japan, listening to the sound of the wind and the fire, you may discover that the conversation about the future of civilization is not something abstract.

It is something that begins quietly, in places like that.

About the Author



Haruo Nishio is a Japanese thatcher based in Miyama, a mountain village in Kyoto Prefecture known for its traditional thatched houses.

For more than thirty years, he has worked as a craftsman repairing and restoring thatched roofs across Japan. Through this work, he has witnessed both the beauty of Japan's traditional architecture and the rapid disappearance of the culture that once sustained it.

In recent years, he has begun restoring abandoned thatched houses in Miyama and creating places where visitors from around the world can stay beneath traditional roofs. Through these experiences, guests can encounter not only the architecture itself, but also the philosophy of life that gave birth to it.

His work is driven by a simple question:

Why did the Japanese people once build so many beautiful thatched houses?

This book is part of his ongoing attempt to explore that question.

Today, he continues his work as a thatcher while welcoming visitors from around the world to experience life beneath a thatched roof in Miyama.

More information about his projects can be found at: <https://www.haruoishio.com>

Stay in a Thatched House

If you wish to experience this way of life,
you are welcome to stay in one of our restored thatched houses in Miyama.

<https://www.haruonishio.com>

Copyright

© 2026 Haruo Nishio

This book is offered freely for those who wish to read and share it.
Please keep the text in its original form and credit the author when quoting.

For more information:

<https://www.haruonishio.com>