

# “The Tagoto Moon”

**In the valley of northern Chikuma in Nagano, central Japan, designated as one of Japan’s Places of Scenic Beauty, lies the Important Cultural Landscape of "Obasute".**

**Ascend Mt. Kamuriki, you will see 1,500 terraced rice fields.**

**The image of the moon reflected in the water was known by the name of "Tagoto Moon" since the Edo era.**

**"Tagoto" means each and every rice fields in Japanese.**

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## Rice fields illuminated by —and reflecting—the moon

Long ago, a feudal lord who hated the elderly issued a proclamation: “once a person reaches 60 years of age, he or she must be abandoned and left to die.” One night, a lone, young man carried his mother upon his back and climbed up Mt. Obasute. He left her deep in the mountains and turned around to go home in complete darkness. Just then, his mother said: “I broke off branches from the trees along the road and threw them away during the journey here; follow them to find your way home.” Moved by the affection of his mother’s protective love even as he was leaving her to die, the man resolved to defy the lord’s fiat and brought his mother back home.

This story comes from the *Tales of Yamato* from Japan’s Heian era, and is the source of the name “Obasute” which means “grandmother-abandonment”. The scene of the story, the long-gone Sarashina village, first appears in literature in *Collected Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times*, completed in the year 905.

“*Seeing the moon over Mt. Obasute at the village of Sarashina, I feel disconsolate*” (author unknown)

Even to a calm, clear heart, the sight of the moon’s cold reflection brings to mind grief and sorrow. Obasute’s connection with the moon is well-established in poetry; enshrined in many waka poems, its legacy as the land of the full moon persists to this day and age. Why is the moon so beautiful here? Is it because of the presence of countless mirrors that reflect the moon’s light?

Originally, terraced fields were constructed to cultivate rice in Japan, which is rife with steep, mountainous areas. The terraced fields at Obasute were built on particularly steep ground—they appear to be a staircase to heaven. The magnificence of this lyrical sight has led to its recognition as one of Japan’s Top 100 Terraced Rice Fields.

## The origin of Obasute’s terraced rice fields

Many of Obasute’s terraced rice fields are created using landslide morphology. This is because the fields are naturally deep-plowed owing to their abundance of water. In landslides, large clumps of soil mass gradually move downward; this creates hollows in the upper sections of land that gather water. The same process also creates the *oike* reservoirs that provide water to the Tagoto Moon area. Originally, the *oike* were wetlands, but as the use of terraced fields expanded, manual labor came to be involved, and the *oike* became artificial.

Terraced rice fields are generally hosted by valley areas, but those in Obasute are located on mountain ridges.

Over thousands of years, rainwater and landslides have transported a great deal of soil mixed with clay along the ridge lines of the uneven landslide topology. Normally, these ridge lines would be poor in organic material owing to the presence of sedimentary layers with insufficient clay, but it is because of the above origins that Obasute is blessed with fertile earth.

Hiroaki Tsukahara, Professor Emeritus in Seismology at Shinshu University, says, “Obasute’s charm lies in sight of the terraced rice fields on its ridges and the Nagano Basin below.”

## The Tagoto Moon —reflecting hearts across the ages

Since its commemoration in the Noh comedy book *Tokusa* (1578), the image of the Tagoto Moon, established in Japan’s Warring States era, has been popularized in haiku and other poetry, travel writings, ukiyo-e woodblock prints, and more. In 1688, a poet Matsuo Basho commemorated his visit with a haiku: “*A face comes to me / an old woman weeps alone / moon as companion.*” In the mid-1800s, a sort of sightseeing guidebook titled *Collected Illustrations of Famous Places on the Road to Zenko Temple* depicts terraced rice fields and a moon-viewing party.



The Tagoto Moon in Ukiyo-e by Utagawa Hiroshige (1853). The multiple moon reflected in each and every terraced fields. Collection: Nagano prefectural museum of history.



The project members try to keep tilting giant mirrors following the moon to make the Tagoto moon.

The Edo-era *ukiyo-e* artist Utagawa Hiroshige, a famous *ukiyo-e* artist in Edo-era, also created multiple works featuring the terraced rice fields. Of great interest is that these works do truly depict a “Tagoto” Moon—in other words, as suggested by the word “tagoto” (meaning “in every field”), the moon is reflected in each and every rice terrace. In reality, however, multiple moons are never reflected at the same time on the surface of a horizontal body of water. Perhaps this, though, is the true Tagoto Moon—the image that lingers in our hearts.

Following Edo-era art, literature, and sightseeing, the Taisho-era and Showa-era travel boom cemented Obasute’s Tagoto Moon in the popular consciousness. Evidence of this lies in Tagoto’s Moon Recreation Project.

In 1936, for the mid-autumn celebration of the 250th anniversary of Basho’s famed visit, a moon-viewing event was held. I spoke with Fumiko Azegami, the daughter-in-law of the event’s organizer, Goyu Azegami. She said that water was stored to reflect the moon, even harvesting the rice early; scaffolds were built, and visitors sat in the fields and balconies to watch the moon. Visitors gathered from all over Japan, and it was a huge affair. The event was commemorated at the time in newspapers with photos.

Actually, there is someone who maintains the tradition of the Tagoto Moon Recreation Project to this day: the Shiori Hometown Boosters’ Committee chairman, Osamu Baba. However, the recreation uses not water, but giant mirrors. Even

without early rice harvesting and cultivation, tilting the mirrors at just the right angles is said to be able to recreate the event. About 60 people of local high school students and volunteers were involved and supportive owing to the invocation of Obasute. The precision in mirror placement get better each year.

## To preserve history and culture for future generations

It is no small matter to preserve Obasute’s terraced rice fields. About 30 years ago, land improvements were conducted that folded 10 terraces into 1 to facilitate the use of heavy machinery. The terraces were, as a result of this process, ruined. How can terraced fields be maintained when they are incompatible with waterways, or roadways, or machinery? Moon-viewing committee chairman Masafumi Mori took action, urging the city to pitch in with locals and help with the fields’ upkeep. A system of ownership for the fields, sold on the attractions of the scenery and the agricultural experience, is being hammered out, but in reality, the practical considerations are formidable. The average age of committee members, who are mainly retirees, is over 70 years. The competing interests of scenic land, sightseers, and local farmers are incompatible.

No solutions have yet been found to the issues that accompany the aging of Japan’s population. There are, however, those who are still striving to protect their hometown also known as “Sarashina” and attempting to drum up support. Calling themselves the “Sarashina Renaissance,” these citizens want to communicate the appeal of Sarashina to the world and are attempting to gather a wide variety of backers—company presidents, head priests, news reporters, artisans, and more—to bolster the effort. A head of the committee Yoshikuni Otani has written approximately 250 internet articles covering history, culture, nature, local activities, and more in Sarashina—a veritable host of topics.

This article, meanwhile, has covered the profundity of the Tagoto Moon and the passionate feelings we all have toward our hometowns. In Mr. Baba’s words, these feelings resound in our hearts “always and forever.” For hundreds of years, the Tagoto Moon has served as a timeless reflection of our souls—and it perhaps will be handed down as part of our lives for generations to come. **g**

### An interview with Mayor Okada

“For the Chikuma River, a raised-bed waterway throw in the town, the terraced rice fields have served as natural dam—and therefore play a vital role in disaster protection. Obasute, the ‘City of the Moon,’ has the full support of the townspeople, and with the help of many, these fields will yet thrive. The local government’s ultimate weapon is nature. The magnificent Chikuma River lies at the heart of the city of Chikuma—we are practically the Republic of the Chikuma River! It is more than a tourist attraction—it is the pride of the people who live here. And if we can’t make ourselves happy with our urban planning, then where are we?” says the mayor with a smile.



### “Shin-Sarashina,” the *yokan* cakes of Toraya

I stopped by Mr. Baba’s company to take a look at some materials and was treated to a teacake—a *yokan*, a traditional Japanese jellied cake made of red bean paste. The local cake was dubbed the “Shin-Sarashina” and came from the old shop Toraya. “What hospitality!” I thought. Once I bit into the rising moon straight out of the *ukiyo-e* print *Kyodaisan mt.* my taste buds were greeted with an exquisite sweetness.

