

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The historic villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama
<i>Location</i>	Gifu and Toyama Prefectures
<i>State Party</i>	Japan
<i>Date</i>	21 October 1994

Justification by State Party

Japan is one of the world's most important examples of a country which has developed an architectural tradition based entirely on wood. Since ancient times, from the emperor's palace, the residences of the aristocracy, and the religious architecture of Buddhism and Shintoism to military facilities such as the castles of the warrior period, all architecture was made of wood. Within the framework of development of each architectural type, the design of form and structure, the techniques of joinery, the process of fabrication, and the techniques of colouring and painting have become highly developed and have produced a great variety of architectural styles and expressions during the long history of Japanese architecture. Not only upper-class architectural types but also vernacular houses and accessory buildings for ordinary people have been made mostly of wood, with very few exceptions. Vernacular houses are classified into two basic types: the *machiya* or town-house, and the *minka*, the houses found in typical farming or fishing villages.

The nominated property is a set of farming villages and the groups of historic houses in those villages. In Japanese farming villages the most typical farmhouse style is a single-storey rectangular-plan structure with the entrance on the long side, and with exterior walls that have exposed wooden posts and clay infill, hipped-gable roofs, and reed thatching. There are, however, various other farmhouse types, and this wide variety is one of the factors that Japan can point to as an example of a vernacular architectural tradition which has universal value. The generalized model of the Japanese village house is relatively small, with a low ridge and a roof pitch less than 45°; the overall image is of a house form that rests comfortably on the earth, suggesting not confrontation with nature but rather passive harmony with it.

In sharp contrast to this image, the nominated *gassho* houses of the Shirakawa-go/Gokayama area are built in a unique style not be found in any other region of Japan. They have one of the most rational structural systems to be developed in Japan. Their special identifying features are:

- 1 The building size is larger than in most other regions. They have tall, steeply pitched (60°), gabled roofs, giving an overall impression of confrontation with nature.
- 2 In ordinary Japanese farmhouses the structural space inside the roof is seldom used, and then only for passive functions such as storage. In the *gassho*-style houses, however, the considerable space resulting from the steep roof structure of open-truss frames is typically divided into three or four levels which are actively used for functions such as raising silkworms or for the storage of mulberry leaves.
- 3 The structural weak points associated with the adoption of the repetitive system of truss frames which make up the gable roof structure is the lack of resistance to lateral forces perpendicular to the truss frames. This problem has been solved in the *gassho* structure by using diagonal bracing within the sloped plane of the roof, to make the roof itself a rigid plane with strong lateral resistance. This technical innovation is not found anywhere else in Japan.

The following points help to illustrate further the outstanding value of these *gassho* houses and villages, and to demonstrate why they deserve special attention for protection:

- 1 The Shirakawa-go and Gokayama areas were remote and isolated with very difficult access, surrounded by the steep mountains of the Chubu region. Until the 1950s relations between this area and the outside world were very limited.
- 2 Because of this isolation, the culture of the Shirakawa-go and Gokayama areas developed relatively independently from the surrounding region, confined to narrow valleys connected by the Sho river. The unique culture of the area was moulded on social systems and lifestyle customs derived primarily from a single spiritual source, the Jodo Shinshu sect of Buddhism.
- 3 The architectural style of the *gassho* houses can be found only in these areas. When their numbers reached their peak, in the late 19th century, there were no more than 1860 of them, out of a total of 5.5 million farmhouses in Japan.
- 4 The number of *gassho* houses and villages has decreased nearly to the point of extinction, largely owing to the social changes resulting from Japan's rapid economic development after World War II.
- 5 The properties selected for this nomination are those where *gassho* houses survive in groups and the original village landscape survives intact, and also where protective measures have been taken in accordance with appropriate conservation laws and regulations.

The nominated properties meet the requirements of **criteria iv and v** of Article 24(a) of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (WHC/2/Revised February 1994).

Category of property

In terms of the categories of property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this nomination constitutes a *group of buildings*.

History and Description

History

In the 8th century AD the Shirakawa-go/Gokayama area was opened up as a place for ascetic religious mountain worship, centred on Mount Hakusan, for a religious order that combined ancient pre-Buddhist beliefs with Esoteric Buddhism. In the later 13th century it came under the influence of the powerful Tendai Esoteric sect, which was in turn replaced by the Jodo Shinshu sect, which still very influential in the area. Its teachings played an important role in the development of the social structure of the region, based on the *kumi* system of mutual cooperation between neighbouring households.

The earliest written documents confirming Shirakawa-go as the name of the area date back to the mid 12th century; Gokayama does not appear until the beginning of the 16th century. The village name of Ogimachi is found in late 15th century documents, Ainokura in the mid 16th century, and Sukanuma in the early 17th century. Shirakawa-go was part of the territory of the Takayama Clan at the beginning of the Edo Period, but from the late 17th century until the Meiji Restoration of 1868 it was under the direct control of the Edo Bakufu (military government). Gokayama was under direct rule by the Kanazawa Clan throughout the Edo Period.

Because of the mountainous terrain traditional Japanese rice-field production was not wholly successful in the area, and so the farmers turned to alternative grains such as buckwheat and millet, cultivated in small fields, but even with these the farming was at little higher than subsistence level. The few marketable products from the area were Japanese paper (*washi*), made from the fibres of the paper mulberry, which occurs naturally in the area, nitre (calcium nitrate) for gunpowder production, and the basic products of sericulture (silkworms and raw silk thread). Paper production continued throughout the Edo Period, but declined when western paper-making processes were introduced in the 19th century. Nitre production, which had begun in the mid 17th century, was also brought to an end with the importation of cheap saltpetre from Europe at the same time. The silk industry survived longer, from the late 17th century until the 1970s; its requirement of large enclosed spaces for silkworm beds and storage of mulberry leaves, was an important factor in the development of the *gassho*-style house.

Description

1 Ogimachi

The central part of the village is located on a terraced plateau on the east side of the Sho river. Only one household remains on the other side of the river. The layout of the village is dominated by the 6 m wide road running north-south through the centre, with a network of village roads, 2-4 m wide, spreading out from it. Whilst the route of the basic layout dates back to the Edo Period, the wide road was cut through in 1890 and is a visual intrusion into the earlier village landscape.

Most of the houses are on individual lots separated by cultivated plots of land, reflecting the traditional land-use. The lots are small and irregular in shape. On the sloping land near the base of the mountain the houses are on terraces supported by stone retaining walls. Their boundaries are defined by roads, irrigation channels, or cultivated plots, not walls or hedges, and so the landscape is an open one. Most have ancillary structures such as toilet buildings, wooden-walled storehouses, and grain-drying shelters, which are usually located (with the exception of the toilet buildings) well away from the dwelling houses, to minimize fire risk.

The house lots are surrounded by irrigated rice fields and dry-crop fields, also small and irregular in shape. In the past the latter were used for growing mulberry trees, for sericulture, but they are now given over to the production of vegetables. The rice fields are fed by means of a network of channels. There are larger cultivated plots on the outskirts of the village, to the south and north.

The designated Group of Historic Buildings is composed of 117 houses and seven other structures. Of these, sixty are in the *gassho* style, most built during the 19th century (the last new *gassho* house was built at the beginning of the present century). They are all aligned parallel to the Sho river, giving a very harmonious and impressive landscape. The majority have three rooms (one large and two small), in addition to an earthen-floored space, but there are also some four-room houses. For the most part they are entered through doors on one of the long sides.

In addition to the pure *gassho* houses, there is one which has been modified with the addition of a second storey. Seven houses are post-and-beam structures with rafter-framed roofs, built in the present century and with an overall resemblance to the *gassho* style. The ancillary buildings have wooden walls and thatched gable roofs, resembling the *gassho* houses.

The village has two Buddhist temples, Myozen-ji and Honkaku-ji. The guardian deity of the village is housed in the Shinto shrine, Hachiman Jinja, situated at the base of the mountain and surrounded by a cedar grove.

2 Ainokura

This village, which was the site of the most intensive sericultural operations until 1950, is similarly located on a terraced plateau above the Sho river. Its layout is focused on the old main road, which rises gently with winding village roads branching off from it. However, a wide road for vehicles was cut through the centre of the village in 1958, disrupting its landscape.

The houses and plots are broadly identical in form and size with those at Ogimachi. The Group of Historic Buildings includes twenty *gassho*-style houses, most with a four-room square layout. A significant difference is the fact that the entrances are usually at one of the gabled ends, by means of a porch with lean-to roof. There are five *gassho* houses converted into two-storey buildings in the present century and seven 20th century reproductions in post-and-beam form.

The guardian deity of the village is housed in the Jinushi Jinja Shinto shrine, and the Buddhist centre is the Shonen-ji temple of the Jodo Shinshu sect.

3 Suganuma

The site of Suganuma is similar to those of Ogimachi and Ainokura, on a terrace overlooking the Sho river, but it is much smaller, with only eight households and a population of forty people. Nine *gassho* houses survive, the most recent built as late as 1929. They resemble those of Ainokura rather than Ogimachi.

Management and Protection

Legal status

Ownership of the individual buildings in the three villages is diverse, including the Government of Japan (Ministry of Construction), the Prefectural and District Authorities, the Japan National Trust, agricultural cooperatives, religious bodies, and individual owners.

Each of the three villages is a Preservation District for Groups of Historic Buildings, as defined in Article 2 of the 1950 Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties. This designation requires, *inter alia*, the preparation of preservation plans for protection, restrictions on activities that may alter the existing appearance of the Preservation District and authorization procedures, and the provision of subsidies for approved actions. Ogimachi has been raised to the status of Important Preservation District for Groups of Historic Buildings, and the elevation of Ainokura and Suganuma to this status is currently under discussion. These two villages were previously designated Historic Sites under the provisions of Article 69 of the 1950 Law, which lays certain obligations concerning maintenance upon property owners.

Overall responsibility for the preservation of the three villages rests with the national Agency for Cultural Affairs in Tokyo. The associated bodies are the Council for the Protection of Cultural Properties and its Committee of Experts (for matters related to the 1950 Law), the Environment Agency (for matters concerning the Natural Park Law), the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery (Agricultural Land Law and Law on the Establishment of Agricultural Promotion Areas), the Forestry Agency (Forestry Law), the Ministry of Construction (River Law), Gifu Prefecture, Gifu Prefectural Board of Education, Toyama Prefecture, Toyama Prefectural Board of Education, Shirakawa-Mura (District), Taira-Mura, and Kamitaira-Mura.

Management

Direct management of individual buildings is the responsibility of their owners, and all work is supervised as prescribed in the very comprehensive Preservation Plans. However, there are subsidies available from local and central government for major projects.

In all three villages the main irrigation channels, trees, and associated areas of forest are listed as Environmental Features in the Preservation Plans. Here similar constraints apply as for the buildings. The Agricultural Land Law strictly controls any change of use of agricultural land.

There are double buffer zones around each of the villages. At Ogimachi the area immediately surrounding the village is designated as a Historic Cultural Landscape Protection District, and this constitutes the first buffer zone; the second is an extended area that is controlled by the same regulations, the Shirakawa-Mura Regulations related to the Control of the Natural Environment. The Gokayama Prefectural Natural Park, designated in accordance with the Toyama Prefectural Natural Parks Regulations, provides the inner buffer zone for both Ainokura and Suganuma. Outside there are further protected areas, under local regulations. The effect of all these regulations, which impose considerable constraints on any kind of activity that might be deemed harmful, is to provide very effective control over the setting and environment of all three villages.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

The lifestyle of the villages in the Shirakawa-go/Gokayama area, which had hitherto developed slowly but steadily over several centuries, underwent radical changes during the period of economic change between 1950 and 1975. There was considerable depopulation as inhabitants moved to the cities, and many traditional *gassho* houses were demolished, to make way for modern replacements. Of the 94 villages with *gassho* houses recorded at the end of the 19th century, only 25 survive to the present day, and the total number of houses has been reduced from some 1800 to 148.

The National Commission for the Protection of Cultural Properties (now the Agency for Cultural Affairs) initiated scientific research on these houses in the 1950s, with the result that five were designated Important Cultural Properties. The concept of preserving entire villages began at Ainokura and Suganuma, both of which

were designated National Historic Sites in 1970. As a result any demolition, relocation, or non-historic remodelling of *gassho* houses is prohibited (restrictions accepted by all the residents).

Preservation of Ogimachi village was initiated by the residents themselves. They formed the Association for the Protection of the Historic Village Landscape in Shirakawa-go Ogimachi Village in 1971 which, with the establishment of the Village Residents' Charter in the same year, created a movement to preserve the whole village -not only the houses but also the fields, irrigation channels, roads, and forests.

Routine repair work has always been carried out by the owners, and in some cases by collaborative efforts by groups organized within the *kumi*, using traditional techniques and materials. Most of this involves replacement of thatched roofs, though in some cases deterioration has necessitated major conservation work involving total or partial dismantling, following the long-established Japanese practices and principles. In such cases the services of an experienced conservation architect are used to ensure historical authenticity.

Fire is a major hazard for thatched buildings, and elaborate fire-extinguishing systems have been installed in all three villages. Fire-fighting squads have also been organized among the residents.

Authenticity

The level of authenticity of all three villages is high. The authenticity of place is total: the sites of the three settlements are important historical evidence in themselves. Authenticity of function is also high: the traditional farming lifestyle persists unchanged (apart from the introduction of appropriate mechanized equipment) and there is a strong sense of community. A certain element of presentation has been introduced to satisfy the increasing numbers of visitors, but the *kitsch* element that disfigures so many traditional settlements elsewhere in the world is absent, and is likely to remain so. The authenticity of materials and techniques is equally high, in conformity with the respect shown to historic buildings by Japanese conservators in their work: the same standards are applied to these vernacular buildings as to the temples of Horyu-ji or Kyoto.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

The three villages were visited by ICOMOS experts in 1993, at the invitation of the Japanese authorities. In view of this fact it was not felt necessary to send a further mission in 1995, following nomination. Consultations also took place with the ICOMOS International Wood Committee.

Qualities

The three villages that make up the nomination are very well preserved and protected examples of traditional settlements of vernacular buildings. Ogimachi is the largest of the three and in some ways the most impressive. The village fabric of each has been disturbed to some extent by the intrusion of through roads for vehicular traffic, that at Ogimachi in 1890 and the other two in 1958; however, the network of lanes winding between house plots and small fields interlaced with the irrigation channels is largely intact and so the overall appearance is not seriously impaired.

It is of considerable significance that the social structure of these villages, of which their layouts are the material manifestation, has survived despite the drastic economic changes in Japan since 1950. As a result they preserve both the spiritual and the material evidence of their long history.

Comparative analysis

The nomination dossier is specific on this point: this group of villages is unique in Japan, where the *gassho*-style house lies outside the vernacular farmhouse tradition. In view of the isolation of Japan from external influence for over the three hundred years when this specialized type of farmhouse evolved, it is justifiable to assume that these villages are unique at a regional level.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

There is a plan to construct a new four-lane national highway, the *Tokai Hokuriku Jidosha-Do*, over 185 km between Oyabe City and Ichinomiya City. A section of this will pass 500 m west of Ogimachi. The statutory environmental impact assessment carried out in respect of this project judged the most serious impact to be on the scenic landscape of the Ogimachi area. It is planned to plant trees to act as screens, and the design of bridges will be carefully controlled so as to protect the landscape.

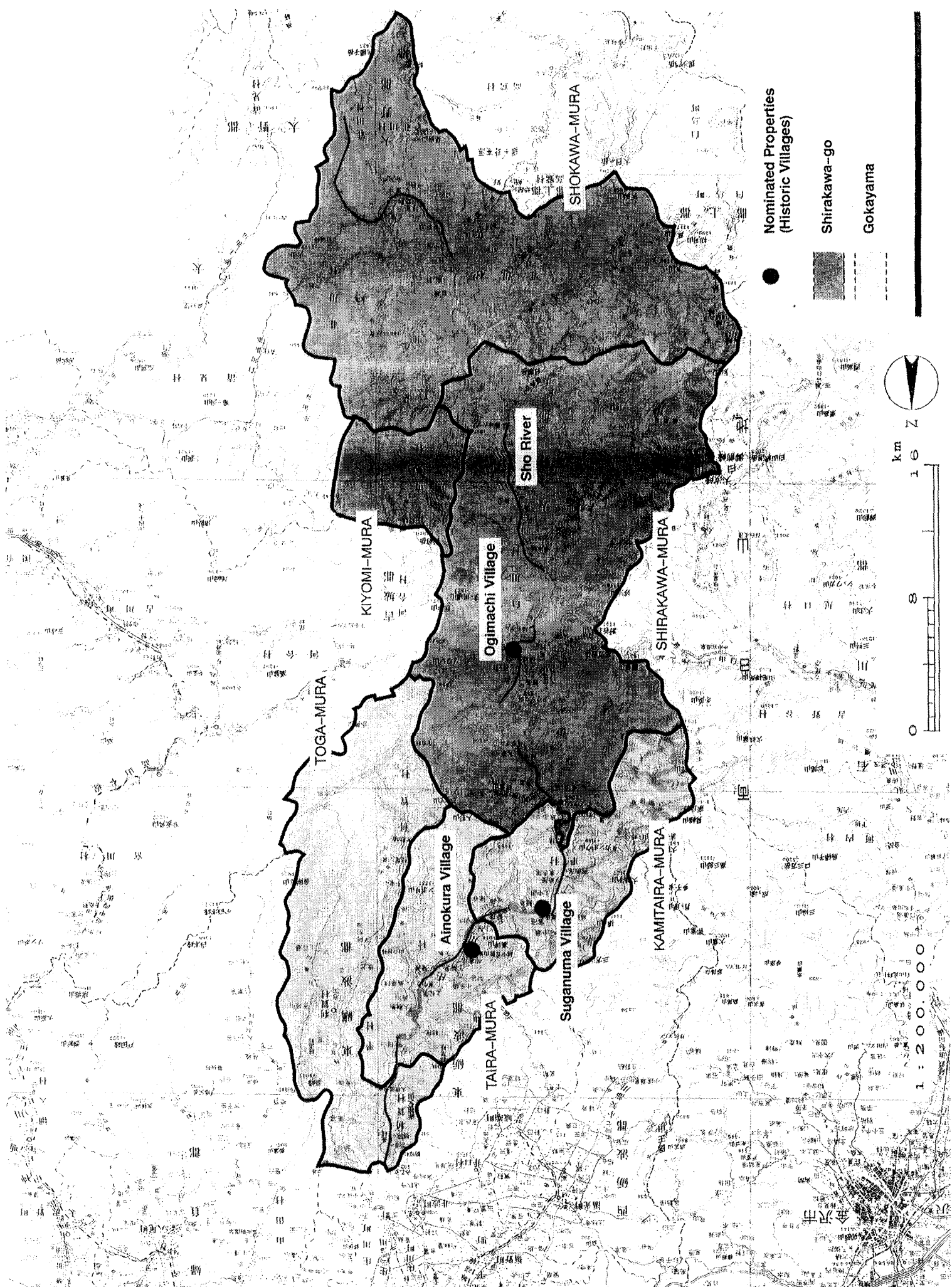
It is proposed therefore that the Japanese authorities be requested to carry out a further review of this project, and in particular of the mitigating action that is proposed, in the form of a detailed landscape survey, so as to ensure the minimum impact on the Ogimachi landscape, which is an integral element of the nomination.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria iv and v*:

The historic villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama are outstanding examples of traditional human settlements that are perfectly adapted to their environment and their social and economic *raison d'être*. They have adapted successfully to the profound economic changes in Japan in the past half-century, but their survival can only be assured by constant vigilance on the part of both government authorities and the inhabitants themselves.

ICOMOS, September 1995



Shirakawa-go et Gokayama : plan de localisation /
 Shirakawa-go and Gokayama : Location map



Shirakawa-go et Gokayama : village de Saganuma, maison Nakajima /
Shirakawa-go and Gokayama : Saganuma village : Nakajima house