

The livelihoods and customs of Ama People around Akashi Strait: the tale of Saonetsuhiko

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The tale of Saonetsuhiko in *Kojiki*

In ancient times the maritime people called *ama* (or *amabe*) were scattered around the coast of Ōsaka Bay, especially between Kōbe and Ōsaka, and along the coasts of Akashi Strait and Harima Bight. It is also well attested that there were *ama* on the opposite coast in Awaji Island. I should like to consider the livelihoods and customs of the *ama* living in the vicinity of the Akashi Strait based on the tale of Saonetsuhiko, ancestor of the Yamato no Atai family as seen in *Kojiki*, and the extant fragment of Akashi *Kōri* in *Harima Fudoki Itsubun*.

The *ama* people in ancient times

The word ‘*ama*’ for Japanese people evokes the image of the *ama* female divers who collect shellfish by diving into the sea, and who appeared in the (2013) NHK television drama *Amachan*. But many male *ama* appear in ancient records. There are instances of them serving as attendants to the king; supplying fresh potable water and seafood to the palace; and serving in diplomacy and foreign battles by taking the ships of the Yamato Court to the continent and back.

It seems that the *ama* community based at the estuary of the present-day Akashi River were particularly exceptional at marine transportation and military power. In this vicinity at the time there were tidal flats of brackish estuary water in which several sandbanks and sandspits extended east–west. It was a good place for anchorage and for tying several wooden boats together to moor them. What is referred to in *Manyō* poems as Akashi Bay or Akashi Lagoon is this stretch of coast. The tale of Saonetsuhiko mentioned above is associated with this district.

Piloting through ‘Hayasuinoto’

The story of Hayanetsuhiko appears in *Kojiki* in the eastward expedition section on Kamu Yamato Iwarebiko (later designated as ‘Emperor Jimmu’; hereafter abbreviated to Iwarebiko). According to this, Iwarebiko’s elder brother, Itsuse no mikoto, had resolved while at the Takachiho Palace in Himuka to embark on an ‘eastward expedition’ going via Buzen, Tsukushi, Aki and Kibi. He attempted to pass through Hayasuinoto¹ by boat. There he encountered someone who approached him while fishing from the back of a sea turtle, waving his ‘wings’. This was Saonetsuhiko, ancestor of the Yamato no Kuni no Miyatsuko: the Yamato no Atai family.

He introduced himself as a deity of this country and vowed to serve him as pilot through Hayasuinoto. He was pulled into the boat with a pole that they passed to him. On account of that he was dubbed Saonetsuhiko (‘Man of the pole’). Hayasuinoto is commonly thought to refer to the Akashi Strait nowadays, and judging from the place names that appear in the story, I support that theory.

The Yamato no Atai as a powerful family descended from the *ama*

Iwarebiko’s eastward expedition is a tale that attempts to justify the origins of imperial rule. So Saonetsuhiko was not a real historical person; and his being awarded a new name for having served as pilot is also a fabrication. However, probably not all of the content of this tale in *Kojiki* is entirely made up by its compilers. They probably worked into it some parts of orally transmitted stories about lives and customs of the Yamato no Atai, who claimed Saonetsuhiko as their ancestor.

On the basis of research in recent years, it is now thought that the group that was the forerunner to the Yamato no Atai joined forces with those of Ōsaka Bay, Awaji and Awa through a network of sea routes, and commanded them militarily. So although the tale of his service on Iwarebiko’s vessel may not be historically factual, it suggests that the forerunner group to the Yama no Atai had the opportunity of serving as pilots when the Yamato Court’s ships passed

¹ Translator’s note: an ancient name for Akashi Strait.

through the dangerous waters of Akashi Strait. This presupposes that in reality, being a powerful group of *ama* (seafarers), they were well versed concerning information about perilous places, such as the currents, navigation channels, topography, and winds of the Inland Sea, including Akashi Strait. This reality is reflected in the tale of Saonetsuhiko.

The significance of the ‘pole’ for the *ama*

What is particularly noteworthy about this tale is the man’s name, Saonetsuhiko. *Hiko* is a eulogistic name for a male; and *tsu* is a possessive particle [equivalent to modern Japanese *no*]; *ne* means ‘root’ and is said to be a suffix expressing endearment. So Saonetsuhiko means something like ‘pole man’, ‘splendid male who wields a pole’. In other words, he, or his name, is symbolised by *sao* ‘pole.’

In ancient Japan the pole was a tool that was intrinsic to the work and livelihood of the *ama* seafaring people. There are frequently scenes in the *Manyōshū* poems depicting *ama* or helmsmen thrusting a pole into the water from the boat in order to propel it forward or stop it at places like sand shoals in the sea or river; and of them using it to push out and change course when they were stuck on sandbanks. They were also used as mooring posts or bollards for tying several boats together when at anchor on tidal flats. And they were used as part of the equipment for net fishing to catch fish and shellfish.

In short, poles were quite important for the livelihoods and lifestyles of seafarers and fisherfolk. In the tale in *Kojiki*, the name Saonetsuhiko is written such that he was given the name from Iwarebiko in gratitude for his piloting; but that would have been a later addition. This name would have been devised by the Yamato no Atai themselves, and then been handed down through later generations. No doubt this name for them denoted a man who could manipulate a boat or excelled at fishing, and was appropriate for the leader of those who made a living from the sea.

***Uchihaburikuru*: ‘flapping his wings’**

The next point to note about this tale is Saonetsuhiko’s gesture of ‘flapping his wings’ when he appeared. Ever since MOTOORI Norinaga’s² (1798) commentary *Kojikiden*, this has been interpreted as his having greeted Iwarebiko by having waved his arms or sleeves like the flapping of a bird’s wings.

However, the *uchi* of *uchiha* is a prefix going with *ha*, ‘wing’, so *uchiha* means an actual ‘bird’s wing’. So I think *uchihaburikuru* should be interpreted more literally as meaning that he approached with the vigour and speed of a flying bird flapping its wings. It says that Saonetsuhiko was riding on the back of a sea turtle at the time, which is also an expression evoking a sense of energy and speed. Here his riding on the turtle is metaphorically compared to a flying bird.

The tale of *Hayatori*, ‘the fast bird’

What should also be noted in connection with this description of a bird is that the speed of the boats piloted by the *ama* people around the Akashi Strait was very fast, and that they themselves compared such boats to birds. This much is clear from the tale of *Hayatori*, ‘Fast Bird’, in a fragment for Akashi *Kōri* in *Harima Fudoki Itsubun* (cited in *Shaku Nihongi*, Vol. 8).³

The setting for this tale is in the vicinity of Akashi Post Station, which looked out over Hayasuinoto (see illustration, p. 148). According to this story, there was a gigantic camphor tree next to the Komade Well at the Post Station, and in the reign of King Nintoku it was so huge that it shaded the whole area from Yamato to Awaji Island. They cut it down and made a boat with it. It was so fast that it flew over the water just like a bird. It rode seven waves with one stroke of the oars. That is why it was called ‘Fast Bird.’ Every morning and evening they went out in this boat and transported the well water as tribute to the king. But one morning they did not make it on time. Thereupon they sang a song and stopped. It went ‘Fast Bird! You are called Fast Bird because you fly to the great warehouse at Sumiyoshi, but what has happened to you?’

It is not made clear in this passage that its main purpose was for transportation of goods. But it is highly likely that this tale was about the *ama* community based in Akashi Bay, i.e., the

² Translator’s note: MOTOORI Norinaga [1730–1801], Japanese scholar of the Nativist (Kokugaku) School.

³ Translator’s note: an annotated text of *Nihon Shoki* in 28 volumes, compiled 1274–1301 by Urabe Kanekata.

Yama no Atai family. No doubt they had been appointed to carry potable water by boat to provision the king (*ōkimi*) at a time earlier than the *ritsuryō* state system. What they made a living at then was rowing a boat as fast as a bird and carrying tribute goods to the king.

The excellence of their work and technology

For the *ama* seafaring folk of this district, birds were living creatures that symbolised the speed of their boats. The story of a boat called 'Fast Bird' was told precisely because of the circumstances and their awareness of their livelihoods. It links to the tale of Saonetsuhiko's 'flapping wings'. The prerequisite for this is the supremacy of the livelihood and technology of the *ama* people of this district.

For one thing, the speed of the boats they operated was unparalleled. For another thing, as is indicated by the pilot being accorded a special name on account of his meritorious service, they were accomplished in knowledge about their sea area, such as at Akashi Strait where the currents flow fast and the channel is complicated and dangerous. We can interpret the livelihoods and customs of this seafaring community and the technology that underpinned it, on the basis of entries in *Kojiki* and *Harima Fudoki*, as above.