

Marriage and reproduction, and communal village festivals in ancient Japan

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Tales about the marriage and birth of deities

There are more than 120 place name origin tales in *Harima Fudoki* based on myths. Many of them are tales about the marriage or birth of deities. In the entry for Anashi River in Shisawa *Kōri*, the Great Deity of Iwa proposes marriage to Anashi no Himegami, the local goddess, but she rejects him. Because of that the Great Deity is enraged, blocks the source of the river, and makes it flow in a different direction. It explains that this is the reason why there is little water in the Anashi River even nowadays.

In the entry for Saioka in Ihibo *Kōri*, a malevolent deity called the Great Deity of Izumo was on Mt. Kamio and killed half of all the people who passed nearby. The story goes that when Korean immigrants (*ayabito*) who had come from Hirakata *Sato* in Kawachi Province tried to find out why, they eventually discovered that it was because the female deity, Himegami, was jealous that the male, Hikogami, had run away from her. And in the entry for Taka *Kōri* in the upper reaches of the Kako River, there are two examples of the deity Okitsushimahime no mikoto, a Munakata deity from Kyūshū, being pregnant with the child of the Great Deity of Iwa and giving birth in this vicinity (entries for Ofuyama and Kiheoka, both Kuroda *Sato*).

In all such cases the deities are described in a personified way, and no doubt that essentially reflects attitudes on the part of the humans who personified them. People at the time were infinitely more deeply concerned about marriage between men and women and reproduction than people in Japan are nowadays. Here I should like to consider the role played by social elements and local communities in marriage and reproduction.

Generational age differences between married couples, as seen in family registers (*koseki*)

Katsunori IMAZU pioneered digital statistical methods in this field, and found intergenerational age differences among 121 married couples recorded in the family registers (*koseki*) of the year Taihō 2 (702) for Hanifu *Sato*, Kamo *Kōri*, Mino Province (present-day Tomikachō, Gifu Prefecture). Married men in their 20s were on average only 2.87 years older than their wives. However, for those in their 40s the age gap averaged 4.96 years, and for those in their 70s it widened to 12.29 years.

This is easily understood to mean that marriage relationships were not stable at the time: the death of a spouse frequently occurred, and regardless of his age a widower would still seek a new wife with reproductive capacity, even as marriage and remarriage repeatedly took place. Even nowadays, it seems that the most frequent request by middle-aged and older men to marriage consultancies is ‘I’d like an introduction to a young woman who can give me children.’ The situation was the same in ancient times.

The fragility of families and livelihoods

Family registers contain artificial manipulations and fictions, and a noteworthy point about Imazu’s findings is the information about the attributes of gender and age that can now be utilised to a certain extent. The reliability of analysis of *koseki* records has risen since the adoption of his method. As a result, we know that couples and families around the eighth century were by no means continuous, but were unstable and almost always resulted in family fragmentation. It is also clear that this instability was predicated upon chronic food shortages and disease.

Thus the family in ancient times was not a fixed entity, and it is important to turn our attention to the fragility of family and livelihood conditions at the time, and to question what kind of systems existed for survival and the maintenance of society. What kind of social mores were there, and how was the community involved in marriage and remarriage, which were the precursors to the birth of children? Let us consider that next.

The high birth rate and pregnancy in ancient times

Based on ancient family registers, we know that the average number of children per woman over their lifetime (the fertility rate) was at least five or six; and when we take into account the high rate of infant mortality, we can surmise that it was probably actually somewhat higher. This is much higher than in present-day Japan when the cumulative fertility rate (the average number of live births per woman between the ages of 15 and 49 years) is only 1.36. In ancient times there was a high birth rate and a high mortality rate. No doubt many pregnant women were to be seen everywhere in the village on a daily basis.

There is the following story about a pregnant woman in the entry for Yabu *Kōri* in *Hizen Fudoki* (present-day Tosu-shi, Saga-ken). When King Keikō visited this district on a royal progress and all the peasants went out to welcome him, 'His Majesty's dog appeared and barked. A heavily pregnant woman stared out the dog and it ceased barking. Hence it is called the land where dogs stop [*yamu*] barking. Nowadays that has been corrupted in the local dialect to Yabu *Kōri*.'

This is obviously a place name origin myth based on a pun, but the tale suggests that it was thought at the time that pregnant women had such mystical powers that they could stop a dog from barking. Pregnant women were especially regarded as a source of life force.

Marriage as the norm for all women

It seems that marriage was the norm for all women: in the village society of the time women from marriageable age onwards were expected to marry or remarry so long as they had reproductive capacity, if fragmentary poem-songs about love and marriage in *Fudoki*, *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* are anything to go by.

'Marriage-oriented society' is one of the terms for this in cultural anthropology and sociology, meaning that in a given society everybody, or almost everybody, marries at some point in their lifetime. In English it is also called universal marriage. This was the norm, and it was the general expectation that all women would marry at some time. In other words, they were not extremely strict about women's chastity from menarche onwards, but actively promoted the early marriage of women, or their remarriage if their husband died, and encouraged thereby pregnancy and childbirth.

Poem-songs exchanged at *utagaki*

The norm of universal marriage was not simply latent as a commonly accepted notion. There were magical ceremonies when it was put into practice communally: after the solemn offerings to the deities during festivals in the village, they held *utagaki* (or *kagai*), picnic parties accompanied by communal feasting and *sake* drinking. At *utagaki*, the poem-songs were not lyrical poems descriptive of one's personal feelings like those of *sōmonka* (love poems) in *Manyōshū*. They were poems recited between men and women in order to seduce a partner by proposing that they immediately 'sleep together', or rejection of that, or they posed a new riddle. This was the locus of sexual freedom and directly linked play with poems, where a man who replied ingeniously could take the woman off to have sex.

What was important was that apart from young people of marriageable age or those who had lost a spouse, at *utagaki* anybody—whether married or elderly, male or female—could join in reciting such a poem. They often recited poems about marriage or sex as instruction and encouragement, based on their own experience or observations of marriage. The majority of them were semi-jocular, such as 'the lives of flowers are short', 'women who turn down marriage will never be happy', 'don't believe the empty promises of a young girl.'¹ Such songs would nowadays be regarded as sexual harassment.

Marriage and sex as societal matters

In short, marriage and sex in ancient times were not treated as personal matters between the individuals involved but were societal matters to be supported and encouraged communally through the participation of all members of the village, in order to prevent collapse of the community through famine and disease and to maintain the village population. In some senses, it was precisely because such *utagaki* were held at regular intervals that the birth rate could be

¹ Translator's note: these sentiments are reminiscent of many traditional British folk songs, and poems such as Robert Herrick's *To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time*: 'Gather ye rosebuds, while ye may, ...' etc.

maintained at higher than the mortality rate. The village festival community played an important role in ancient local society when there were chronic food shortages and disease.