

A windhole fertility festival to pray for bountiful harvest and many children

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The myth of Konohana Sakuyahime

There is a place name origin myth for Uruka *Sato* in the Shisawa *Kōri* section of *Harima Fudoki*, present-day Uruka, Ichinomiya-chō, Shisō-shi. It says, ‘The figure of Konohana Sakuyahime, wife of the Great Deity, was extremely beautiful [*uruwashī*]. So it was called Uruwa.’ ‘The ‘Great Deity’ refers to Iwa no Ōkami, the Great Deity of Iwa, who was worshipped all across Harima, centred on Shisawa *Kōri*. The place name Uruka is a forced pun on *uruwashii*, meaning ‘beautiful’.

The actual place name origin derives from *uruu*, meaning ‘to be damp or watery’, with the suffix *ka* denoting place. There are vestiges of this usage in modern Japanese even now, such as *arika*, meaning ‘whereabouts’. The area towards the Ibo River at Uruka has long been afflicted by the river’s flooding since ancient times, such as the great flood that occurred there in August 2009. That reality has been stamped into the place name, so to speak. On the slightly higher ground at the foot of the mountain to the west, the site of a mid-Yayoi Period settlement has been found (Uruka Archaeological Sites A and B), and a bronze bell was unearthed pre-war in the valley to the south. So this area was settled from quite early on. (See map p. 172). In short, we learn from *Harima Fudoki* that the female deity called Konohana Sakuyahime was worshipped at Uruka, and that local people thought of her husband as the Great Deity of Iwa, the deity at Iwa Shrine on the opposite bank of the Ibo River to the southeast.

One of the small shrines in Shisawa *Kōri* cited in *Harima Kokunai Jinmyōchō*¹ was ‘Kisaki Myōjin’. The name ‘Kisaki no Yashiro’ [Kisaki (‘Concubine’) Shrine] also appears in ‘*Ichinomiya ryō narabini shinkan shasō tō kōji denpata chūmon an*’ [Draft report on fields held by priests at Ichinomiya Shrine] in *Iwa Shrine Documents* of Kyōtoku 3 (1454). It is thought that Kisaki Myōjin and Kisaki Shrine refer to Kawasaki Inari Shrine at Uruka, about which more will be said later. From this we know that the deity here was regarded as a wife of the deity at Iwa Shrine well into the Middle Ages.

The population structure of villages in ancient Japan

According to *Harima Fudoki*, Shisawa *Kōri* comprised nine *sato*, including Uruka. It says that there was a hamlet (*mura*) called Haka in Uruka *Sato*, which is connected with the place name of present-day Haga-chō. The population of a *sato* at that time was around 1,000, to judge by the extant family registers in the Shōsōin collection of Tōdaiji Temple in Nara. And it is thought that there were usually about three hamlets to a *sato*. A simple deduction is that a hamlet had a population of approximately 350 people.

On that basis, there were probably about two other hamlets apart from Haka in Uruka *Sato*, and it is highly likely that one of those would have been Uruka hamlet with a population of approximately 350. The reason that the place name Uruka was adopted for the administrative district of the *sato* was no doubt because the *sato* headman came from that hamlet.

The population of Uruka at present is 207, in 69 households. That means that its population in ancient times was probably a lot bigger, at about 1.5 times the size. Moreover, the composition of Uruka in ancient times would have been a classic population pyramid. Around 50 per cent of the population would have been the generation of children under the age of sixteen. The number of these at present in Uruka is only 11, no more than 6 per cent of the total (as confirmed April 2021).

Prayers in hope of a good harvest and fecundity

As recent research has elucidated, life in ancient Japan was under harsh conditions of chronic famine and outbreaks of disease that sometimes lasted many years. Average expectation

¹ Translator’s note: a list of shrines compiled nationally by province under a directive of the Grand Council of State in 863.

of life at birth was about 30 years for men and women, and the infant mortality rate (for 0–5 year-olds) ran at nearly 50 per cent. Even if one made it to adulthood over 15, many people died young, resulting in men and women who had lost their spouses, orphans, and old people with no one to depend upon. So people in ancient Japan had incomparably greater religious faith than nowadays. They offered solemn prayers to the deities at regular festivals. Prayers that were especially important on such occasions were those for the ripening of the rice crop and the warding off of epidemics, so they that they themselves may survive; and also prayers for ‘many children’ for maintenance of the village population.

As regards prayers for producing many children, they actually carried out magical festivities, *utagaki* picnics, for finding spouses and lovers once the latter part of the festival started and the communal feasting commenced. At *utagaki* picnics, poem-songs were not only recited by young people seeking a partner, but jokey salacious ones were thrown in by all members of the village including old people and married couples, aimed at both the younger generation of people of marriageable age, and also to encourage marriage (or remarriage) of the men and women who had lost their spouses. It seems that if the men and women were so inclined, it led to them leaving the venue, going off into the bushes and having sexual relations straight away.

The windhole at Kawasaki Inari Shrine

The venues where such festivals for the deities were held in ancient Japan were not shrines with permanent buildings but quiet places thought to be appropriate to the descent of the deity, mystical places such as crags (*iwakura*), giant trees, waterfalls, springs, etc. What is noteworthy as a sacred place in Uruka village is a windhole from which a cold draught of air sometimes blows within the grounds of Kawasaki Inari Shrine in present-day Uruka.

Windholes and limestone caves were often objects of veneration in ancient Japan. In the list of shrine names in Vol. 10 of the tenth century *Engishiki*, there is a shrine called ‘Himesaka Kanachiana Jinja’ in Aga *Kōri*, Bichū Province. At present there is a shrine with splendid buildings called Himesaka Kanuchiana Shrine, familiarly abbreviated to ‘Himemiya-san’, at Toyonaga Akōma in Niimi-shi, Okayama Prefecture. However, as is clear from the element *kanachiana* in the name, the original object of veneration of this shrine was the huge limestone cave about 100 metres deep to the west, formed as a doline-type sinkhole (funnel-shaped depression or enclosed sinkhole formed in karst landscapes). The local people would have regarded this entire sinkhole as a place where a deity resided, and would have assembled here and conducted a festival to it at regular intervals.

Worship of the vagina (reproductive organs)

We should bear in mind that the name Himesaka Kanuchiana Shrine specifically contains ‘Himesaka’, and that it is dubbed ‘Hime-miya’ even nowadays. The *hime* of Himesaka denotes a woman of high status. *Saka* means sloping ground, but it also means a wonderful place (*sa* = prefix of embellishment; *ka* = place) where there is a boundary, an end or a gap in things. In other words, judging by the name of the shrine, they compared the opening of the sinkhole to a woman’s vagina (reproductive organs), and worshipped it as a symbol of fertility and fecundity.

It is also likely that in addition to offering solemn prayers at the entrance of the sinkhole as part of such festivals, they also performed some kind of *kamiwaza*, or ‘act of the deity’, to do with sexual intercourse. To the modern way of thinking this might be considered obscene, but for people in ancient Japan, for whom abundance in both agricultural production and human reproduction were important issues, it was simply a natural part of life.

The festival of the windhole, to pray for abundant harvests and fecundity

We can assume that the windhole at Uruka likewise was venerated in ancient times as a female reproductive organ that would bring about abundant harvests and many children; and that a festival would have been held at regular intervals in front of it. It is quite probable that worship of this windhole was the basis for the entry in *Harima Fudoki* that the Uruka deity was a female deity called Konohana Sakuyahime. Nowadays it is a shrine to belief in the rice-fox god Inari, but we can infer that once it was the locus of a festival such as that described above.