CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

NOTIONS OF LIFE, OLD AGE AND DEATH IN AGEING JAPAN

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1. Folklore Studies and Discussions of Old Age

In terms of discussions of old age in folklore studies to date, in the past there were, for example, the discussions of Yanagita (1931, 1946) and Orikuchi (1928), and in recent years, those of Miyata (1996), Yamaori (1984) and others. Yanagita discussed the elderly viewing them as an image or symbol of the ancestors, while Orikuchi’s discussions focused on elderly men as represented in the performing arts, as in Okina no Hassei [The Emergence of an Old Man]. Yanagita and Orikuchi were seeking to gain a thorough understanding of things like the ancestors’ spirits and the deities [kami] by looking at the elderly. Later, from the 1980s onwards, theories of old age and childhood were attempted by Noboru Miyata, Tetsuo Yamaori and others, drawing on the centre–margin theory of Victor Turner (1969). These positioned the elderly and children as marginal beings compared to adults, and highlighted the spirituality and sacred nature of these two groups. In this way, from the discussions of the elderly of Yanagita and Orikuchi to those of Miyata and Yamaori, the spirituality and sacred nature of children and the elderly have been noted, but in all of them, the view of the elderly as an image is dominant, and it is difficult to say that they are entirely based on data from direct observation of the elderly in real life.

2. Village Societies and the Role of Elderly People

There are many villages in the Kinki region, the neighbouring Wakasa and Banshū areas, and the Isehima area where it is established that the elderly men of the village take on a set religious role, such as looking after the local tutelary deity, as their duty after retiring from village administration. In these villages, the traditional organization that oversees the rituals for the tutelary deity’s shrine is called the miyaza [shrine
worship association], and in the fields of history, folklore studies and the sociology of religion, research on these associations in terms of shrine ritual organizations has been carried out for a long time (see, for example, Higo 1938, 1941; Harada 1975, 1975; Sekizawa 2005). It has also been recognized that the structures called the tōya [household rotation] system and the age system are characteristic of the shrine worship associations. I have drawn attention to the fact that it is elderly people who are at the heart of the shrine worship associations, and have not only analyzed these associations in terms of the aforementioned shrine ritual organizations, but have also tried to combine this with analysis from the standpoint of individual elderly people (Sekizawa 2000).

I will introduce here two case studies as part of the results of this research: the group of elders of the shrine worship association known as the “group of ten elders” [jū nin shū] of Kitanaiki, Minakuchi-chō, Kōka City in Shiga prefecture; and the household head rotation [tōya] system of the deity of Ōyagyū in Nara City.

Case study 1: The “group of ten elders” of Kitanaiki, Minakuchi-chō, Kōka City in Shiga prefecture

The elders of the miyaza [shrine worship association]

Kitanaiki is currently a community of 81 houses, and of those, 35 old established families play the main roles in running the village. It is the custom that the heads of these families retire from village administration in March of the year they reach 65 in the traditional kazoe doshi method of calculating age (see footnote 2). They then pass on the right to participate in village administration as family representative to the oldest son, in a handover known as yakuhari. When yakuhari takes place, the successor takes on the duties of attending the monthly assembly, called sankai, working in positions other than head of ward, participating in communal village work, and participating in the rituals of the Yōfuku temple (Jōdōshū sect) to which their families are affiliated, and of the tutelary deity’s Kawata shrine. The seating order at meetings and the order of serving as head of ward are decided by age. In particular, it is the rule that someone who is older even by only one year takes the higher seat at meetings. Moreover, in cases where more than one person was born in the same year, rather than comparing their own dates of birth, the years of birth of their respective fathers are compared, and the one whose father was born earliest, even by only one year, takes the higher seat, in an age criterion system called oya otona [parent adult] unique to the village.