

**Old Stories, Original Retellings:
Domestic Conflicts and Family Relationships
in the Blind *Biwa* Tradition of Kyushu**

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ABSTRACT

Although, today, *higobiwa* is treated as an independent genre, it is apparent that it came into contact with other narrative traditions, borrowed some of their stories, and later reworked them, thus creating a unique world of Kyushu tales.

In this paper, I first provide an overview of this tradition. Then, I will discuss two famous pieces focusing on domestic conflicts and family relationships from the repertory of blind *biwa* players from the Kyushu region: *Azekakehime* あぜかけ姫, the story of a poor young woman, who is tormented by her evil mother-in-law, and *Shuntokumaru* 俊徳丸, a famous Japanese tale about a wicked stepmother, which is found in several Japanese storytelling genres.

KEYWORDS

Blind *biwa* players, *higobiwa*, *Azekakehime*, *Shuntokumaru*, evil stepmothers, evil mothers-in-law

Despite its overwhelming popularity through the centuries, the *biwa* music started to lose its dominating role in the folk performing tradition from around the end of the 16th century. Most blind *biwa* players, *biwa hōshi*, gave up the *biwa* for *shamisen*, *koto*, or *kōkyū* instruments. After the Edo period, it was only in Kyushu that the *biwa* was not replaced with the *shamisen* (Hyōdō 2000).

The genre of blind *biwa* from Kyushu is widely known as the *higobiwa* 肥後琵琶. However, the term is relatively new and appears to have been coined not earlier than the Meiji era to distinguish the *biwa* tradition of Kumamoto from the *satsumabiwa* and *chikuzenbiwa*. Although today the *higobiwa* is treated as an independent genre, it is apparent that it came into contact with other narrative traditions, borrowed some of the stories, and later reworked them into its own, creating a unique world of Kyushu tales.

In this paper, I first provide an overview of this tradition. Then, I will discuss two famous pieces focusing on domestic conflicts and family relationships from the repertory of blind *biwa* players from the Kyushu region: *Azekakehime* あぜかけ姫, the story of a poor young woman, who is tormented by her evil mother-in-law, and *Shuntokumaru* 俊徳丸, a famous Japanese tale about a wicked stepmother, which is found in several Japanese storytelling genres.

1. The tradition of blind *biwa* players of Kyushu

The traditional account of the origin of blind *biwa* players tells that in the second year of the Empō era (1674) Funahashi *kengyō* 舟橋検校 came from Kyoto to Kumamoto at the request of Lord Hosokawa. In Kumamoto, Funahashi *kengyō* gave a performance of *heike*, and then composed several tales on local historical themes, such as *Kikuchi Kuzure* 菊池くづれ and *Miyako Gassen Chikushi Kudari* 都合戦筑紫下り, and taught them to blind *biwa* players from Kyushu (de Ferranti 2009: 95). However, no reliable documentary evidence for this account of origin exists.

Primary evidence is lacking for this account of origin and for the putative Edo-period lines of transmission and early divisions into *ha*. In post-war writings these accounts of Edo-period schools of performance based in Kumamoto were given in publications by the local historian Hirakawa Atsushi, but with references to only a single source, an otherwise unknown text of 1925. (de Ferranti 2009: 95-96)

Not much is known about the activities of blind *biwa* players from Kyushu in the past. During the twentieth century, many researchers and folklorists, such as Tanabe Hisao, Kimura Yūshō, Kimura Rirō, Nomura (Ga) Machiko, Narita Mamoru, Hyōdō Hiromi, and Hugh de Ferranti, collected data on the tradition of blind *biwa* players from Kyushu, made recordings of their performances and conducted detailed research on the history and nature of the tradition. Despite the fact that some efforts to popularize the tradition of blind *biwa* players through the introduction of its representatives and their repertory were undertaken, it ceased to exist at the end of the twentieth century.

There were 345 registered professionals in 1907... In 1963, Kimura Yūshō documented 12 men in Kumamoto Prefecture who were still capable of performance. In 1978 a total of 16 living former practitioners were listed by Hirakawa, but few among them could still play... Three of those 16 remained alive in 1992, of whom 2 were capable of performance... Provision of welfare and education to the blind in rural areas, moreover, has meant that no blind people have learned *higobiwa* in the post-war era, and in 2007 only the *chikuzenbiwa* player Katayama Kyokusei is able to perform a small number of pieces he learned during the last years of Yamashika's life. (de Ferranti 2009: 106)

Yamashika Yoshiyuki 山鹿良之, who is the subject of de Ferranti's monograph (2009), became one of the most popular *biwa* players from Kyushu due to his many public performances organized by local and central organizations, and publications that elucidated some aspects of the performer's life and the tradition he represented and practiced throughout his life. Yamashika was even called *saigo no biwa hōshi* ('the last *biwa hōshi*') for his ability to perform and for the abundance of his repertory (Hyōdō 2009; de Ferranti 2009). And the tradition of blind *biwa* players received designation as an Intangible Cultural Asset in 1973 (Hyōdō 2000: 195; de Ferranti 2009: 280).

A short description of the life and activities of the two performers, Yamashika and Ōkawa Susumu 大川進, is given below.

Yamashika Yoshiyuki

Yamashika was born in 1901 in the family of a farmer living in Ōhara of Tamana District (Kobaru of Nankan), Kumamoto Prefecture. Yamashika lost the sight in his left eye at the age of four. At the age of twenty-two, Yamashika apprenticed with a *biwa* player named Ezaki Hatsutarō 江崎初太郎 from Amakusa. The professional name of Ezaki was Tamagawa Kyōsetsu 玉川教節 (Hyōdō 2000: 194). Yamashika's mother was from the same district where Ezaki's teacher, Hori 堀, known by the professional name Tamagawa Kyōjun 玉川教順, used to live. That is apparently the reason why Yamashika's grandfather asked Ezaki to teach Yamashika (Ga 1972: 26). The name of the lineage of Tamagawa was granted to Hori by Lord Hosokawa of Higo himself (Ga 1972: 26). In the past, there were over twenty members in the lineage. In the days of Yamashika's apprenticeship, Ezaki had several students, including Hamaguchi Kamesaku 浜口亀作, also known as Tamagawa Kyōraku 玉川教楽 (Ga 1972: 26).

Yamashika learned how to handle the *biwa* from Ezaki, and then he acquired several *hauta* 端歌, short songs. After that, he was taught the shortest and simplest piece among the narratives, *Ono no Komachi* 小野小町. According to Ga, Yamashika first memorized the text of the tale, *monku* 文句, and then learned how to accompany the text with *biwa*. The method of learning the first piece, a method of direct transmission of the repertory, is called *kuchi-utsushi* 口移し, which literally means 'mouth-to-mouth transferal.' When learning a piece of the repertory, *gedai* 外題, a student repeats the words of his teacher until they get fixed in his memory. The rest of the student's repertory is usually acquired through indirect transmission, *kiki-obo* 聞き覚え. *Kiki-obo* literally means 'learning by listening.' It is a method of transmission that involved learning the outline of the story performed by other storytellers and then constructing one's own version of it (de Ferranti 2003: 135).

Yamashika learned to play the *biwa* for about a year, and during that year only one out of ten practice sessions was supervised by the teacher. Yamashika practiced the *biwa* twice a day on his own. In one day, Yamashika was evidently able to memorize about one third of a one-hour-long narrative piece. We should note, however, that each student had a different memory capacity and memorized new material at a different speed. For example, Kamesaku had difficulty in remembering new narratives. However, once he remembered something, he did not forget it. Another student, Hori Matami 堀又巳 memorized narratives very quickly but failed to keep them in memory for very long (Ga 1972: 28).

When a student memorized some of the repertory, he became able to accompany his teacher on *kadozuke* 門付け, or *kadobiki* 門びき, performances when *biwa* players moved from household to household performing pieces of

their repertory in exchange for such things as rice or tea, or sometimes money. Sometimes students undertook *kadozuke* on their own. However, students never received from villagers the same things their teachers did (Ga 1972: 28).

Yamashika apprenticed with Ezaki for three years. During those years, he learned such narratives as *Miyako Gassen Chikushi Kudari*, *Kikuchi Kuzure*, *Kugami Gassen* くがみ合戦, *Owari Sōdō* 尾張騒動, *Sumidagawa* 隅田川, and *Mochi Gassen* 餅合戦. One of the most famous tales in his repertory, *Anchin Kiyohime* 安珍清姫, also known as *Dōjōji* 道成寺, Yamashika learned from his fellow student Kamesaku. Yamashika had to leave Ezaki only after three years of apprenticeship because of an incident that affected his relationship with his teacher. According to common rules that regulated the relationship between students and teachers, all students had to give everything they received during *kadozuke* performances to their teachers. One day, Kamesaku and Yamashika did not follow the rule and kept the profit gained from a *kadozuke* performance. This became a matter of friction between the teacher and the student (Ga 1972: 28).

Yamashika returned home, but he was not capable of any farm work because his eyesight had deteriorated further by then. Yamashika decided to become a professional *biwa* player and dedicate his life to storytelling. However, in order to do so, he had to increase the number of pieces in his repertory. For about a year Yamashika followed a performer named Mori Yoichi 森与一, known by the professional name Tamagawa Kyōzan 玉川教山 (Ga 1972: 28). From Mori Yamashika learned such narratives as *Ichino Tani* 一の谷, *Ko-Atsumori* 小敦盛, *Azekakehime*, *Shuntokumaru*, and *Oguri Hangan* 小栗判官. However, the circumstances for the acquisition of these pieces of repertory remain unclear (de Ferranti 2009: 260). Yamashika kept learning stories and pieces of ritual performances from other *biwa* players and ritualists throughout his performing life. For example, Yamashika learned *hashira-date* 柱立て, which is performed during the *watamashi* わたまし rite, from a performer named Kyōbutsu 教仏. And he learned *sanjū-butsu* 三十仏 from Sakamoto Saichi 坂本さいち (Ga 1972: 28-29).

Yamashika became a professional *biwa* player under the name Tamagawa Kyōen 玉川教演 in 1927 after going through *nabiraki* 名開き, a ceremony through which a student acquired his professional name and was officially accepted by the community as a *biwa* player. De Ferranti describes two types of qualification, the conclusion of an apprenticeship and *nabiraki*, as important events in the performing career of blind *biwa* players.

As a formal declaration of one's professional status under a given professional name, this public event was considered important for legitimate members of a *ha*. While the conclusion of an apprenticeship usually yielded an actual certificate from one's teacher, the successful conclusion of a *nabiraki* was in effect the means by which *biwa hiki* acquired their professional license in the eyes of their fellow musicians and the patronage communities that would sustain them. (de Ferranti 2009: 256)

Yamashika supported himself and his family through performances of the *watamashi* and *Kōjin-barai* 荒神祓い rites and secular tales during *kadozuke* and *zashikibiwa* 座敷琵琶, pre-arranged performances of tales given in the *zashiki* of private houses. Yamashika was active in such areas of Kyushu as Ōmuta, Setaka, and Yanagawa. He became one of the most popular representatives of the tradition of blind *biwa* players both among researchers and the popular media. De Ferranti describes Yamashika's last few years as follows:

Although his career as an active performer had effectively ended by 1990, he continued to be asked to perform in occasional events instigated by researchers and aficionados of local culture. In the first week of July 1992 he performed in Tokyo... A few months after returning from Tokyo, he fell from steps and was hospitalised. Although he recovered,... he was absolutely incapable of holding the *biwa*... His health failed again in 1995, so that he entered a nearby old people's home where he died on June 24, 1996. (de Ferranti 2009: 16)

Ōkawa Susumu

Ōkawa was born in 1918 in Izumi, a city located in Kagoshima Prefecture. Ōkawa lost his eyesight soon after birth. For about six years, from the age of twelve, Ōkawa apprenticed with Nakano Kōemon 中野幸右衛門, known by the professional name Miyagawa Kyōgaku 宮川教学, and Tanaka Motarō 田中モタロウ. Both *biwa* players belonged to the Miyagawa lineage and were trained by the sighted first-generation Miyagawa Kyōgaku (de Ferranti 2003: 136).

From his teacher, Ōkawa learned ritual performances such as the *watamashi* and *Kōjin-barai*, and tales such as *Azekakehime*, *Ishidōmaru* 石童丸, *Oguri Hangan*, *Futaba Gunki* ふたば軍記, and *Kumagai Atome Sōdō* 熊谷跡目騒動 (Hyōdō 2000: 277). Ōkawa did not acquire any *hauta* during his years of apprenticeship. In the Miyagawa lineage, the first piece learned through the *kuchi-utsushi* method was *Azekakehime*. Ōkawa learned this piece by rote at the initial step of training, which is why he could reproduce it from memory word for word in his later years. His *gei-gatame* 芸がため, a tale learned as the final practice piece of training, was *Futaba Gunki*. Ōkawa's repertory also included such tales as *Amakusa Junrei* 天草巡礼 and *Shiga Danshichi* 志賀団七. These tales Ōkawa learned from other performers through *kiki-obo*e (Hyōdō 2000: 277). Ōkawa was actively engaged in ritual performances and storytelling in Izumi, Akune, and Ōkuchi in the pre-war years, but the focus of his livelihood gradually switched to massage in his later years. From the mid-seventies, Ōkawa had to give up practicing his *biwa* because of paralysis (Hyōdō 2000: 277). Ōkawa passed away in 2000 (de Ferranti 2003: 133).

The tradition of blind *biwa* players, as seen in the twentieth century, can be briefly summarized as follows. Most *biwa* players were blind males of extremely low social status. Becoming a professional *biwa* player who performed *harai* rituals, such as the *watamashi* or *Kōjin-barai*, and entertained the public with tales and songs during *kadozuke* and *zashikibiwa*,

was a way for them to secure a livelihood (Ga 1972; Hyōdō 2000; de Ferranti 2009).

It was common for a student to live with his teacher, dedicating most of his time to housework rather than training. Those who wanted to become professional storytellers apprenticed with and had to stay with their teachers for up to eight years. Those students who mastered *hauta*, short songs, could participate in *kadozuke* performances. Any profit from such performances was always given to the teacher. Teachers only taught their students new material unwillingly to make it difficult for students to become independent performers. The only way for young performers to increase their repertory was to listen to the performances of others (Hyōdō 2000). Students were not allowed to disobey in any way or leave their teacher until the teacher decided that a student was ready to become an independent performer. Those who failed to follow the rules were punished. In other words, students were a source of income for teachers. That is the reason why strict control over their activities was necessary.

2. The repertory of blind *biwa* players of Kyushu

As already mentioned above, blind *biwa* players were both ritualists and entertainers, and accordingly, their repertory included both ritual narratives and secular tales and songs.

Ritual performances

Blind *biwa* players performed rites such as the *watamashi* わたまし, *Jijin-barai* 地神祓い, and *Kōjin-barai* 荒神祓い, or *kamado-barai* 竈祓い. These rites were performed in order to pacify a deity or spirit, and in the past played an essential role in the life of rural society.

A variety of ceremonies, including the above mentioned *harai*, exorcism or blessing rites for the hearth (*kamado-barai*), earth (*Jijin-barai*), wells (*Suijin-barai*) and for new houses and buildings (*watamashi*), as well as rainmaking ceremonies (*amagoi*), continued to be carried out by some *biwa hiki* as an integral part of their livelihoods until the 1960s. (de Ferranti 2009: 126)

The secular repertory of blind *biwa* players

The secular repertory of the blind *biwa* players is represented by *hauta*, short songs delivered in the traditional seven-five-syllable meter, and *danmono* 段物, long narratives. The repertory of blind *biwa* players included over eighty *hauta* songs and tales (Narita 1985). However, even though the narratives are mentioned in some records, blind *biwa* players active in the second half of the twentieth century could not perform even a half of that repertory. According to Narita Mamoru, some of the pieces from the repertory of blind *biwa* players were later included in the repertory of *chikuzenbiwa* and *satsumabiwa* (1985: 164). Narita divided the repertory of blind *biwa* players into two groups: old pieces that appeared before the Meiji era and new pieces composed after the Meiji era. Narita classified the old repertory into several smaller groups, such

as *kodenmono* 古伝物 (old tales), *gundanmono* 軍談物 (tales about battles from different parts of Japan), *kokkeimono* 滑稽物 (humorous stories), *mukashibanashi* 昔話 (tales about cunning or foolish people), and *hauta*. According to Narita, the content of most of the pieces was unstable and could change depending on the occasion or the audience (1985: 165).

De Ferranti introduced a different classification of the repertory based on his interviews with Ōkawa Susumu. De Ferranti divided tales into *heikemono* (tales about the Genpei war), *bushimono* (tales about famous warriors), *kassenmono* (tales favored for their scenes of fighting or battle), *sanjakumono* or *tōzokumono* (tales about criminals of the Edo period underworld), *Bukkyō biwa* tales (tales with a specifically didactic intent), *zokumono* (tales about the lives of commoners, either farmers or townspeople), *ureimono* (tales favored for scenes of personal tragedy and suffering) and *charimono/ kerenmono/ kokkeimono* (tales enjoyed for their humorous scenes) (de Ferranti 2003: 138). However, de Ferranti noted that in some cases it was difficult to put a tale into a certain category.

Some of these categories clearly overlap; for example, the attributes of *kassenmono* and *ureimono* are also applicable to pieces within the categories of *zokumono* and *sanjakumono*, and a tale such as *Shiga Danshichi*, about an itinerant samurai of ill-repute, might be categorized as *ureimono*. (de Ferranti 2003: 139)

Ga Machiko gave a different classification (1972). Her classification is introduced below.

(1) Genpeimono 源平物

Genpeimono (or *heikemono*) is a category of tales about the war between the Heike and the Minamoto clans. Such tales as *Kurama Nobori* 鞍馬上り, *Kurama Kudari* 鞍馬下り, *Ishibashi Gassen* 石橋合戦, *Ko-Atsumori*, *Yashima* 屋島, *Ichino Tani*, *Kumagai Atome* 熊谷跡目, *Dan no Ura* 壇ノ浦, and *Yoshitsune Ochiyuki* 義経落ち行き are included in this category.

(2) Sogamono 曽我物

Sogamono is a category of tales that tell the story of the Soga brothers' revenge. These tales are roughly based on *Soga Monogatari*, the story of Soga Sukenari and Soga Tokimune, who find and eventually kill their father's enemy Kudō Suketsune.

(3) Sekkyō 説教

Sekkyō is a category of tales with didactic content. Such tales as *Oguri Hangan* 小栗判官, *Yuriwaka Daijin* 百合若大臣 and *Shuntokumaru* are included in this category.

(4) Chihō no katari 地方の語り

Chihō no katari (regional tales) is a category of tales related to historical events of Higo province. Such tales as *Kikuchi Kuzure*, *Miyako Gassen*, *Chikushi Kudari*, *Shimabara Junrei* 島原巡礼, *Tenryūgawa* 天竜川 and *Yanagawa Sōdō* 柳川騒動 are included in this category.

(5) Charimono or kokkeimono チャリ物・滑稽物

Charimono or *kokkeimono* is a category of tales with humorous content. Such tales as *Mochi Gassen* 餅合戦, *Uo-zukushi* 魚づくし, *Garakuta Gassen* がらくた合戦, *Yasai-zukushi* 野菜づくし, and *Ono no Komachi* are included in this category.

(6) Other tales and hauta

Anchin Kiyohime, *Sumidagawa*, *Azekakehime*, *Izari Katakiuchi* いざり敵討, *Kugami Gassen*, *Hirayama Gassen* 平山合戦, *Shiga Danshichi*, and *Hazama Jūjirō* はざま十次郎 are categorized by Ga as ‘other tales’ (Ga 1972: 39).

3. Tales about domestic conflicts and family relationships in the tradition of the blind *biwa* players

The character of the evil or wicked stepmother who forms the center of a family conflict is a thematic element found in folklore and literature worldwide. Maternal death in childbirth was not a rare occurrence in the past, and it usually led to the husband’s remarriage, thus introducing the figure of the stepmother into the life of a surviving child. In the world of folklore, stepmothers are usually depicted as being jealous and cruel characters, who often create conflicts for the protagonist. They exemplify the antagonistic force in the story. They often abuse, mistreat, and torture their stepchildren. World-famous examples of stories involving conflict between stepmothers and stepchildren include *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Hansel and Gretel*. Japan is not an exception to this trend. Among the Japanese legends and tales about evil stepmothers, we can find such stories as *Ochikubo Monogatari* 落窪物語, *Sumiyoshi Monogatari* 住吉物語, and *Chūjō-hime* 中将姫, which all center on the conflict between a stepmother and a stepdaughter. There is also another category of tales, which includes *Shuntokumaru* and *Aigonowaka* 愛護若, in which a stepson becomes the victim of his wicked stepmother’s evil manipulations.

As for the figure of the mother-in-law, while this figure may be less popular, she is still an important evil villain in folktales and fairy tales. Just like evil stepmothers, evil mothers-in-law usually create conflicts within the story or tensions in the marriage, thus becoming the reason for the female protagonist’s suffering and misfortunes. They are typically depicted as being cruel, controlling, and domineering figures who, for some reason, dislike their daughters-in-law and, looking for excuses to get rid of them, turn their lives

into hell.

Folkloric mothers-in-law and stepmothers share much in common. They are evil female characters who become a source of domestic conflict in the story and function as antagonists, scheming against the protagonists and mistreating, torturing, or even attempting to kill them. Interestingly, stories about evil mothers-in-law are not common in Japan probably because the Japanese legal system supported and promoted respect for the husband's family from early times.

The two stories from the repertory of blind *biwa* players presented in this paper involve conflict inside the patrilocal residence: the first, *Azekakehime*, is the story of a daughter-in-law who is tormented by her in-laws, and the second, *Shuntokumaru*, is the story of a stepson who is tormented by his evil stepmother. Although it is difficult to identify the precise source of each story, we know that both tales were extremely popular in Kyushu's rural areas, especially among female audiences, at least until the mid-20th century, when the tradition of blind *biwa* storytelling was still being performed.

Azekakehime

The story of *Azekakehime* was extremely popular in the Kyushu region, especially among women, for whom weaving was a part of daily routine and who probably identified themselves with the heroine who was being mistreated and tormented by her in-laws. However, unlike the second previously mentioned story (that is, *Shuntokumaru*), *Azekakehime* seems to be unique to the repertory of blind *biwa* players (Hyōdō 2000: 276). The following passage is a summary of *Azekakehime*, as performed by Yamashika Yoshiyuki.

Sayoteruhime, who is known for her excellence in weaving, marries Asawakamaru of Kawachi. Soon after her marriage, her evil mother-in-law decides to get rid of her. She gives Sayoteruhime the task of making a special garment but casts a curse on her to ensure that she will fail. To do so, the mother-in-law visits a shrine and makes offerings to Hachiman. Because of this curse, Sayoteruhime forgets to make one stitch and subsequently fails to accomplish the task. The family then shames, abuses, and torments Sayoteruhime. Eventually, Sayoteruhime becomes a nun and leaves her husband's house. The mother-in-law succeeds in her evil plan. However, though her wish is fulfilled, she does not fulfill her promise to Hachiman. For this reason, she is punished: her house burns down, her daughter dies, and she becomes blind and leaves her home. Sayoteruhime's husband, Asawakamaru, follows Sayoteruhime, and the two reunite and return to Kawachi.

Shuntokumaru

Although the original source of the story of *Shuntokumaru* has not been identified, it is generally believed that this story is a Japanese adaptation of an account of the Indian Prince Kunala. Prince Kunala falls victim to his stepmother's slanderous reports because he has rejected her romantic advances. In some versions of the story, she tries to secure the succession of her own son. The story of *Shuntokumaru* is extremely popular in Japan. We can find its adaptations in the repertories of various traditional storytelling

artforms including *nō*, *sekkyō-bushi*, *jōruri*, and the tradition of the blind *biwa* players.

- *Nō*: *Yoroboshi* 弱法師, a play composed by Kanze Motomasa
- *Sekkyō-bushi*: *Shintokumaru* しんとく丸, attributed to Sado Shichidayū and published in the Third Month of 1648
- *Jōruri*: *Sesshū Gappō Ga Tsuji* 摂州合邦辻, a play written by Suga Sensuke and Wakatake Fuemi; first performed in 1773
- *Higobiwa*: *Shuntokumaru*

Within the tradition of the blind *biwa* players, *Shuntokumaru* is considered a *danmono* narrative, a long tale consisting of *dan*. According to Hyōdō, the entire story can be performed in four, five, six, or seven *dan*. The following is a summary of *Shuntokumaru*, as performed by Yamashika Yoshiyuki.

Shuntokumaru is the son of Inoue Nobuyoshi from Kawachi Prefecture and his wife Sayoteruhime. After Sayoteruhime dies, Shuntokumaru's father marries a woman named Osuwa. Osuwa gives birth to a son, Otogorōmaru. One day, Osuwa, who wants her own son to become the heir, goes to the Kiyomizu-dera temple. There, she prays to the Goddess of Mercy, Kannon, for several days, asking her to kill Shuntokumaru. Because of this curse, Shuntokumaru is turned into a blind leper. He leaves his home and goes on a pilgrimage. On the way, he meets Hatsugikuhime, his promised wife. She accompanies him on his pilgrimage, and with her help, the curse cast by Osuwa is removed. Shuntokumaru recovers and returns home with Hatsugikuhime. This time, because the curse has been removed, Osuwa is turned into a blind leper and must leave on a pilgrimage herself.

Although the story of a young man who falls victim to his stepmother's machinations remains at the core of retellings, the story of Shuntokumaru is presented differently in the *nō*, *sekkyō-bushi*, and *higobiwa* versions. *Yoroboshi* focuses on the drama of the separation and reunion between father and son, while the *sekkyō-bushi* and the *higobiwa* versions show the detailed progression of events, thus allowing each character to play a distinct role in the narrative's development. The *sekkyō-bushi* and *higobiwa* versions share a similar story scheme and action scheme. The major differences between the two lie in their representations of the relationship between Shuntokumaru and his father and his relationship between the two stepbrothers.

- **Father and son:** The *sekkyō-bushi* version focuses on the conflict between Shuntokumaru and his father, ending in their reconciliation. Although his father sent him away, Shuntokumaru forgives him. In the *higobiwa* version, the father character is overshadowed by the wicked stepmother, who becomes the only antagonist.
- **Stepbrothers:** The relationship between the two brothers differs significantly in the two versions. In the *sekkyō-bushi* version, Shuntokumaru's stepbrother is an invisible character who

unintentionally becomes the reason for Shuntokumaru's misfortunes and the victim of his own mother's machinations. In the *higobiwa* version, he is a friend and ally who is willing to help Shuntokumaru throughout any circumstances.

Despite the apparent similarities between the *sekkyō-bushi* and *higobiwa* versions of *Shuntokumaru*—at least at the level of general narrative structure and action development—it is reasonable to assume that the two stories are not linked directly but, rather, share a common source, an older tale of Shuntokumaru, which was circulated orally across vast territories and was well known to various audiences across Japan. Among the existing versions of the story, the *higobiwa* version of *Shuntokumaru* undoubtedly best accommodates the demands of female audiences by presenting a vivid and detailed depiction of the wicked stepmother character.

Conclusion

As mentioned previously, the sources of both *Azekakehime* and *Shuntokumaru* remain unknown. The story of *Azekakehime* seems unique to Kyushu. Thus far, no story similar to *Azekakehime* has been identified in the repertory of other storytelling genres. The tale of *Shuntokumaru* is widely known in Japan and has been retold in various forms over the centuries. Interestingly, in Kyushu, the two stories that center on domestic conflict have become closely linked, and the events of both stories take place in the same household. Sayoteruhime, the protagonist of the first story, *Azekakehime*, is Asawakamaru's wife. She was tormented and driven away by her mother-in-law, Asawakamaru's mother. However, she reunited with her husband at the end of *Azekakehime*. Seemingly, she eventually found her happy ending but soon died after giving birth to Shuntokumaru, the protagonist of the second story. In turn, Shuntokumaru fell victim to the manipulations of Asawakamaru's second wife, the stepmother. The two stories in the *higobiwa* repertory even share a similar narrative structure and similar scenes or *themes*: the antagonists cast a curse → the curse is fulfilled → the protagonists suffer and leave home → the curse loses its power → the protagonists return home safely → the antagonists lose their eyesight and leave.

It is difficult to determine when the story of *Shuntokumaru* entered the *higobiwa* repertory and how it became linked to *Azekakehime*, but the popularity of the two stories suggests that domestic conflict was quite an appealing topic for the audiences of blind *biwa* players most probably because this theme was related to their real-life experiences. All tales reflect the lived circumstances of their audiences. Stories conveyed in oral circulation do not survive unless they accommodate their audiences' psychological needs and provide them with emotional support or relief.

Regarding the origin and development of stories such as *Azekakehime* and *Shuntokumaru*, we must consider the peculiarities of Japanese society and culture. Although characters such as the evil mother-in-law and the wicked stepmother seem to be universal and have been appearing in folklore and literature worldwide since ancient times, in the context of Japanese society, they only appeared and became popular villain figures in folktales after patrilocal marriages, which require the wife to move into and live in her husband's household, under the same roof with her in-laws, became

common. Research on the history of families in Japan, however, shows that patrilocal marriages did not become common until the medieval period. Thus, we can assume that stories about domestic conflicts—namely, stories involving in-laws and stepmothers—emerged and gained popularity in Japan at a much later date compared to those in other regions. We can assume that these stories were either brought over from the continent along with the patriarchal ideas of Confucianism and the Buddhist sutras or may have independently developed in Japan in response to the evolving social circumstances of Japanese society, which gradually shifted from favoring matrilocal/duolocal marriages to patrilocal patterns.

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