Various Forms of Collective Tomb System and Ancestor Worship

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Collective tomb systems, that is, tomb systems in which a number of families or people unrelated by blood share one mounded tomb or charnel, can be classified into the following three types, according to the relationship of the people who share the tomb: Dōzoku collective tomb systems, village collective tomb systems, and temple collective tomb systems. This paper describes how and under what social structure such tomb systems were formed and accepted by the people of the area concerned, discussing mainly the collective tombs of the Ito Clan at Mizusawa (Akita Prefecture) for the Dōzoku collective tomb system; and the example of Oya (Ishikawa Prefecture) for the village collective tomb system, together with the examples of Shimo-Seinaiji and Kami-Seinaiji in Seinaiji Village (Nagano Prefecture), where both systems co-exist in close proximity.

The processes of formation and character of the tombs in these collective tomb systems were totally different. On the one hand, common tombs, or tombs under the collective tomb system, were built where Dōzoku groups shared religious services based on their character as cult, communities for ancestor. On the other hand, tombs under the collective tomb system were built as burial facilities for ashes, or cremated remains, which had until then been abandoned, following the introduction of "external" ideas on the storage of, or respect for, ashes. In the latter case, the tombs were not necessarily built as objects of worship. The tombs were simply burial facilities for ashes, and nothing the more. A typical example of the former case is Sōbo (the collective tomb) at Mizusawa (Akita) and of the latter, the Kotsudo in Kami-Seinaiji Village (Nagano). However, once such collective tombs were built, they functioned as a symbol of the unification of the community sharing the tomb. The motivation was not as a medium for ancestor worship, but was based on the fact that the tomb became a place where community members confirmed their identity through the fact that "they would be all buried in the common tomb".

Such tombs as seen under the collective tomb systems are also reproduced in the modern age. Modern collective tombs have exceeded the traditional framework of the tomb system, and show extremely diversified development.