Disappearance of Yobai and Dissolution of Village

Morikuri Shigekazu

In folklore, the problem of sex has not often been dealt with, and in the cases it was discussed only from the male viewpoint. In this paper, the author attempts to examine the occurrence of Minamata disease in relation to the collapse of the local community, and especially to the collapse of the communal system of sexual give-and-take, called "Yobai".

In the Meiji era, the modernization of Japan brought with it the concentration of land in the hands of newly-risen oligarch landlords. As the monetary economy permeated society, the mutual aid relationship collapsed among landless farmers, and Yobai, as a mutual aid relationship between male and female in the form of sexual give-and-take, also disappeared.

Meanwhile, women from poorer regions with no industry, such as Amakusa, were sold into prostitution, and red-light areas were formed in the urban fringes of the modern cities. Male of all classes, including newly-risen landlords, male in traditional families, and factory workers, turned to the prostitutes, indulging in dissipation and finally ruin.

This was perhaps an economic form of eroticism for modern male; however, it eventually resulted in self-destruction, in the form of Minamata Disease, one of most pitiable injury.