Cave Graves and the Custom of Reburial on Yoron Island

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The custom of reburial after bone washing is extensively seen in the Amami Islands and the Ryūkyū Archipelago. After the Ban on the Exposure of Dead Bodies by Kago-shima Prefecture in Meiji 10 (1878), inhumation was gradually adopted in the Amami Islands. As a result, inhumation followed by bone-washing and reburial came to be the method generally adopted. However, before the adoption of inhumation, the custom consisted basically of exposure of the body followed by reburial after bone washing. This custom was exactly the same as that of the Ryūkyū Archipelago.

The opinion that the custom of secondary burial after bone washing, which was widespread in the southern islands, also existed extensively throughout the Japanese Archipelago from ancient times, has been maintained by Mr. KOKUBU Naoichi and others. According to this opinion, a tombstone was erected at the place of the ritual service for bones taken for reburial after bone washing; then the practice of bone-taking (bone-transfer) ceased, and a “blind” grave comprising only a tombstone, came to be set up, resulting in the double grave system. In this paper, the author maintains that the double grave system was totally unconnected with the custom of reburial after bone-washing, being adopted only as a popular custom, as an institution for memorial services for the spirits of the dead, under the guidance of Buddhist priests.

Next, this paper analyze the burial grave system of Yoron Island. At Gusuka and Machama in the south part of the island, there remain many cave-graves called “Jishi”. These cave-graves were composed of a mortuary and a place for the installation of secondary burial jars, during the period when exposure of the dead body was usual. After the Ban on Exposure of Dead Bodies in Meiji 10 (1878), people gradually came to bury bodies in the front garden outside the Jishi, two years later reburying the bones in the traditional Jishi. Furthermore, due to the development of individual graves, the Jishi lost its function; according to the author’s analysis, bodies came to be buried and the reburial jars placed within the individual graves. Even though tombstones have come to be erected over these individual graves, the custom of reburial still consistently remains. It is unbelievable that the custom of reburial ceased due to the development of tombstones. The author also deals with the characteristics of funeral ceremonies. Finally, this paper deduce that the custom of reburial after bone washing arose in the Edo period, under the influence of the “wind-water” ideology, which was transmitted from Okinawa to Yoron Island.