Records and Memories of the Life and Death of the Farmer-soldiers: Examples from Two Soldiers in Kitakami City

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With regard to letters written by soldiers, until recently the emphasis was on listening to the voice of the soldier, or author of the letter, and little attention was paid to the voices of those receiving the letter. This paper attempts to show, from the point of view of folklore research, how the families of soldiers understood and accepted the mass abnormal deaths of the soldiers dying in battle or from disease contacted at the front, as the war situation expanded from the Chinese-Japanese War to the Asia-Pacific War. To this end, the paper looks at the letters of two farmer-soldiers from Waga Town in Waga County, Iwate Prefecture (present-day Kitakami City), classifying and analyzing from the three separate aspects of documentation: records (letters), memories and oral accounts (interviews), objects (mortuaries and gravestones and other objects representing the dead). As a result, four issues are discussed. First, one notable feature of the letters sent by the two farmer-soldiers to their families was the fact that they did not discuss the actual situation at the battlefront but rather kept referring to the soldiers' homes, revealing how, even though the soldiers' physical bodies were at the battlefront, their minds were with their families at home. The act of sending letters was, for the soldiers, a way of signaling that they were still alive, just as the act of receiving the letters conveyed this information to the families. Second, such deaths from fighting and from disease contacted at the front were, for the traditional Japanese farming society, a first-time experience. Although death announcements were published in the bulletins and although village and family funerals hastily carried out, the families could not immediately accept the fact that their loved ones were dead and wives felt compelled to make investigations on their own to confirm their husbands' death. Third, special attention was given to the motivation behind the construction of graves for soldiers killed in battle or by disease at the front. Analysis indicates that building a grave was one way of accepting a husband's death, and that the grave served as the mechanism for severing and joining together the living and the dead. The fourth issue concerns the importance of objects representing the dead and of memorial services such as "kuyo," "irei," and "tsuito." The traditional ceremony to mourn the dead is "kuyo" in the case of a normal death and "irei" in the case of an abnormal death. When mourning for a dead person without bringing religious aspects into the picture, "tsuito" would be the appropriate ceremony. Naturally, these three types of ceremonies have different meanings and functions and each follows its own vector in its placement of the deceased: the "kuyo" lead the deceased to attain of Buddhahood (enter Nirvana), the "irei" leads to deification of the deceased, and the "tsuito" demonstrates that the deceased retains his dignity in death. It is characteristic of objects representing those killed in battle and dead from diseases contracted at the front as well as the appropriate ceremonies to be multi-layered both in terms of space and religion.