A Study of Graveyard Villages, Water Villages and Shrine Villages from the Perspective of Folk Customs: the Case of Handa-mura in the Southwestern Part of the Nara Basin

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Past research on the formation of graveyard villages (villages situated around a graveyard), water villages (village situated around rivers and waterways), and shrine villages (villages situated around a shrine) have pointed out the points of similarity and points of difference between these villages. However, studies on the circumstances of their connections with one another have ended with inconclusive findings. The aim of the research in this paper is to investigate and analyze the circumstances of the connections between graveyard villages, water villages and shrine villages through a specific example found in the Handa village district located in the southwest part of the Nara basin. First, the two graveyard villages of the Gokuraku-ji village and the Kuhon-ji village are contrasted. While in the Kuhonji-ji graveyard the existence of an enormous five-tiered gravestone said to belong to the Nara Haru clan and a section for local lords have been ascertained, in the Gokuraku-ji graveyard there is an absence of any physical evidence the supports the traditions of the Handa clan. However, we may assume that the formation of these graveyard villages basically saw the participation of neighboring residents in the operation of the temple and the establishment and operation of a graveyard by the local elite such as the Nara Haru clan and the Handa clan. Common to both graveyard villages is the concurrent use of the graveyards by parishioners and non-parishioners, indicating that graveyard villages had been places of traditional assembly from before the introduction in the Early Modern period of a system of temple parishioners. However, they differ in that whereas the communal graveyard of Kuhon-ji temple is located within the temple precincts, the communal graveyard of Gokuraku-ji temple is separated into an inner graveyard owned by the temple and an outer graveyard that is shared by the graveyard village. It is believed that this corresponds to the extent of historical security in the operation of a temple depending on the permanence of its head priest. The formation of water villages is basically founded on the natural conditions of the water systems of the Mizukoshi River. In addition, there is the shared legend of Kakunosin Ueda that tells of evidence of the opening of waterways, and one point of note is that an event in his honor have been passed down to the present day as folklore. Although the shrine villages are assembled around the Hitokotonushi-jinja shrine, these have been separated into three different types as shown below. The first type are those where responsibility for religious services is taken on by a privileged religious association called the zako, which does not have shrines within the Daiji (larger
section of a village). While the second type have shrines within the Daiji, they are involved in religious services as parishioners of both, and the third type give priority to the shrines within the Daiji so that they are effectively semi-parishioners of the Hitokotonushi-jinja shrine. Major changes have taken place in recent years that have affected the connections between these localities such as the common practice of cremation in graveyard villages, the opening of the Yoshino River drainage system in the water villages, and the dissolution of the zako in the shrine villages. Major changes of particular significance are the wording of “within the grounds of Daiji Gokuraku-ji” in a bylaw on the communal graveyard, the influence (the shape of Ohgi) of Kakanoshin in the oral tradition of the water villages, and the strong adherence seeds from the Mimurasaki tree (callicarpa japonica) in the religious services of shrine villages. These speak of the dynamic of oral tradition wherein there is an attempt to supplement the loss of tradition with the personification of memory.