The Miyaza System and Rites in Northeastern Nara Prefecture

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This paper reports on the miyaza (council of elders who represented families who claimed association with a local shrine and who annually elected a shrine official to run festivals) system and the structure of religious services on the basis of local investigations conducted since 1997 in the northeastern part of Nara Prefecture with a primary focus on the two settlements of Tada and Someda in the Higashisato district of Muro village. The following are the two main issues addressed in this paper. First, by providing examples I examine the involvement of the toya system (appointment of head of a miyaza) which is the structural principle of the miyaza at a family level, and an age-based hierarchy, which is the structural principle at an individual level. In the districts studied here age-based hierarchy has maintained a special importance as the positions and the performance of religious services are determined according to age. Accordingly, the issue requiring address here is one of the questions presented by the general theory on the miyaza system. Second, one issue in relation to the structure of miyaza rites concerns the methods used when miyaza actually performed religious services. In other words, this is a question of whether a religious role and economic burden are concentrated on a specific toya (miyaza head). Research into the miyaza system to date has uncovered the existence of two such types, and the second issue covered here is an investigation of what kind of trends are to be found in the districts that have been studied.

The findings of these investigations have resulted in the following conclusions. One is that the fundamental principle of the miyaza in these districts is the principle of the toya system wherein families form the basic unit, and that the age-based hierarchy performs a supplementary role within this in determining the positional relationships between individuals. A second conclusion is that the miyaza in this district have avoided extreme concentration in specific families, resulting in a tendency to divide roles between several toya, and to share the burden of expenses.