The Kamasu Bag and the Word "Kamasu": Customs in the Toso Region and OHARA Yugaku

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The social custom called "kamasu-zukiai" that is symbolized by the kamasu bag that serves as a container for transporting goods has been passed down through the generations in Chiba Prefecture. Besides the practice where members of households from "kamasu-nakama," or kamasu groups, provide help when there is a funeral within the local neighborhood organization, they also make a contribution known as "kamasu rice" as a means of supplying food for everyone. This "tsukiai" is mentioned in records of donations made to families of deceased and has also been passed down in written documents. In historical materials related to OHARA Yugaku, who reformed traditional customs and reformed villages in the Toso region at the end of the Early Modern Period, there is mention of a "kamasu" at New Year. There are records of income derived from kamasu rice and money donated by the disciples of Yugaku every New Year, which were used to cover the costs of Sei-gaku activities and Yugaku's living expenses. Previous research on Yugaku does not disclose the reasons why the rice given at New Year is referred to as kamasu rice. The aim of this paper is to discover the nature of the relationship between this word kamasu and the kamasu bag, which are manifest on two different occasions, namely at funerals and at the New Year, and to shed light on OHARA Yugaku's involvement in this.

My investigations involved an analysis of the details of the New Year kamasu and the regional distribution of the disciples whose names appear in those records. Although there has been separate research on the custom of kamasu-zukiai on an individual village basis, I cataloged this custom and compiled a distribution map from folk custom survey reports and from the author's own surveys because there was no clear understanding of distribution within Chiba Prefecture. This process revealed that at funerals the kamasu group members who are part of kamasu-zukiai eat rice from the same iron pot (kama) as the family of the deceased and in so doing mourn the dead together with the bereaved. For this reason, one may conclude that rather than simply being a group of people related on geographical grounds, it is a group that has extremely strong bonds. The distribution of Yugaku's disciples overlaps the distribution of the kamasu-zukiai. There are indications that the custom of kamasu-zukiai passed down in each village by disciples shifted the occasion and function of kamasu rice to Sei-gaku and the New Year, thereby making use of this custom to help Yugaku. The disciples comprise a group of people who share the same beliefs and gather together for the common goal that is Yugaku, and the strength of their bond is comparable to that of the kamasu groups. We may assume that their bond was further strengthened by eating rice from the same iron pot.
Thus, even though attention has been given to changes in customs that occurred under the leadership of Yugaku, through an investigation of kamasu-zukiai and New Year kamasu this paper proposes a new perspective: the active introduction by disciples of a custom that had been part of their daily life for the purpose of supporting Sei-gaku.