Makuradango and Thoughts of the Dead

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Makuradango dumplings for the dead are used as offerings for the dead along with makurameshi bowls of rice for the dead. While it is mentioned in courtesy books and prepared by funeral directors in Tokyo, etc., its actual manner varies depending on the regions involved. Conventionally, folklore studies have focused on the special way of making makuradango, including how to grind it, the flour, using a furnace, etc. and the quantity of dumplings involved. However, they have hardly mentioned the folk customs involving reading the thoughts of the dead and the natural lifespan through the changing color of the dumplings.

The reason for the above is because since Kunio Yanagita, makuradango has been considered almost the same as makurameshi; namely one of the foods for the dead, based on the understanding that the concepts of eating together and taboo originated from the division of those who distributed food for the dead and those who did not receive them, because sharing and eating the food for the dead had special effects. Subsequently, it was only Shigeru Gorai who focused on makuradango itself. Gorai analyzed the nature of makurameshi and regarded it as an object for soothing the soul of the dead, while makuradango was seen as an offering of a feast for evil spirits rather than the soul of the dead.

Meanwhile, a folklore chronicle records some regions, mostly in Akita, and also in Aomori and Yamagata, where, when the color of makuradango changes to black, this is judged to represent the natural lifespan of the dead. Conversely, there are other regions where the color of makuradango is used to judge the thoughts of the dead, and when it changes to black, the dead are perceived as having regrets, etc. Although these judgments are contrasting, they represent an evaluation over death by the remaining living people. This seems one example of folk customs in which living people describe the thoughts of the dead in various ways so that they can accept the fact that a particular person died.

There is also another folk custom that judges whether there will be new dead through the changing color of makuradango. As Gorai said, such a belief helps us see makuradango as an offering of feast for evil spirits and existence aware of the fate of the dead. Further study of makuradango will be required.

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