Consideration on the Term “Ikusagami” (God of War)

SAEKI Shin’ichi

This paper examines the term *ikusagami*, meaning god of war. An early example of the use of *ikusagami* is found in the collection of folk songs, Songs to Make the Dust Dance, later followed by examples in a number of war chronicles such as the Tale of the Heike. In the later medieval period, the term can often be found in books on military tactics. Previously, it appears that these three *ikusagami* found in the various war chronicles, in the Songs to Make the Dust Dance, and in the books on military tactics have all been basically classified in the same category. These three different expressions of *ikusagami*, however, rarely overlap each other in terms of their meaning, and a good approach would be to first consider them as independent entities, and then to explore and consider their differences.

Firstly, the *ikusagami* of the war chronicles is examined. In the Tale of the Heike several examples are found, and although there are differences among the various versions of the tale, in general an expression “offer to *ikusagami*” is mainly used; in this context this means to take the head of an enemy in battle. Similar examples can be seen in the Kotohira texts of the Tale of Hogen, the Record of Great Peace, and the Jikko texts of the Jokyu-ki (Chronicle of Jokyu). It is indicated that this expression meaning to take a head is derived from a custom where warriors would make an offering of a head as a sacrifice, and in fact, it is highly likely that the expression is based on this practice; however, the actual ritual of offering heads is unclear, and the possibility of worshipping a specific god as an individual *ikusagami* cannot be inferred.

In the Songs to Make the Dust Dance, we find the lines “*ikusagami* (these gods of war) live east of the barrier, Kashima-jingu Shrine, Katori-jingu Shrine, Suwa no Miya Shrine…” which is probably a list of gods with military or martial characteristics; however, there are many unclear points as to why each god is referred to as an *ikusagami*. In any case, it is doubtful whether these gods were worshiped as *ikusagami* by the common warrior on the battlefield in other rural areas. It can be considered that these kinds of *ikusagami* are different from the *ikusagami* depicted in the war chronicles with their offerings of heads taken in battle.

Next, *ikusagami* are often found in the so-called books of military tactics including the Heiko Hiyutsu Ikkansho (Secret Art of Tactics), thought to have been compiled in the Kamakura period. They are mainly mentioned in the context of invoking protection and success in battle, which is also commonly found in the treatise Shutsujin Shidai (Procedures for Going into Battle). The term is also quoted in the Aro Monogatari (the Tale of the Crow and Heron) and not just in the books of military tactics; however, in these books descriptions of offering an enemy’s head to *ikusagami* as seen in the
war chronicles is rarely found (although there are a few exceptions, which will be explained later).

In addition, the books of military tactics offer a vast range of gods both traditional and other than traditional to receive the prayers of warriors; Marishiten (a tutelary deity of samurais) and other various Shintoist and Buddhist deities can also be listed. In these books, an expression “ninety eight thousand ikusagami” often appears; despite this, the ikusagami of Japanese ancient times in rural areas such as Kashima, Katori or Suwa as found in the Songs to Make the Dust Dance hardly appear. The Edo period book Ikusagami: Questions and Answers written by Sadatake Ise refuted the concept of the “ninety eight thousand ikusagami” that appears in the world of the books on military tactics, and he also refuted the worship of Marishiten and other Shintoist and Buddhist deities as ikusagami. He went on to list Onamuchi no Mikoto, Takemikazuchi no Mikoto, and Futsunushi no Mikoto as Japanese ikusagami. His view is close to perceptions of the ikusagami in the rural Kashima or Katori mentioned in the Songs to Make the Dust Dance. Paradoxically what is revealed from Sadatake’s description is that belief in the ikusagami of medieval warriors was not an orthodox belief in the gods of heaven and earth, which is traditionally found in Japan and actually connects the Songs to Make the Dust Dance with Sadatake Ise; medieval warriors actually incorporated various deities and beliefs including belief in a vigorous, powerful and sometimes impetuous deity. It is probable that esoteric Buddhism, ascetic practices in the mountains, and the Way of Yin and Yang resulted in a complicated syncretic fusion, and in response to the warriors’ earnest demands for victory in battle, civilian religious figures created various kinds of magical belief.

As described above, the ikusagami found in the war chronicles and those in the books of military tactics are different in nature; however, the phrase “a blood sacrifice to ninety eight thousand ikusagami” mentioned in the Tale of Soga, a book written entirely in kana syllabary, draws attention as a means to connect both concepts. Among the books on military tactics, Kinetsushu Volume 10 describes “how to make an offering of a head to a deity” in which a ritual offering a head to ikusagami is mentioned. Although these are just a few examples, they can be regarded as a successor of the ikusagami depicted in the war chronicles. The true state of such “blood sacrifice” is not exactly known, which leads to the need to examine the relation with China. In terms of words, a relation with an originally Chinese word 血祭り (kessai in Japanese pronunciation) needs to be considered; probably this word has a weak relation with the Japanese word 血祭り (chimatsuri, meaning blood sacrifice), but with regard to the term 血祭り (kinko) found in the History of the Later Han, and meaning killing a person and smearing their blood on a hand drum, it is possible to think about the similarity to the Japanese 血祭り (blood sacrifice).

To answer the question whether the ikusagami to which a head is offered, as found in the war chronicles, is a term based on a sense of offering a sacrifice to a god, perhaps it is necessary to consider after careful examination of the expansion of such terms, classification of books of military tactics, and similar examples in the whole of East Asia.

Key words: Ikusagami, war chronicles, warriors, books on military tactics, blood sacrifice