The Hikobe Family in Kiryu and Their Activities as a Former Retainer of the Ashikaga Shogunate Family

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Through an analysis of the activities of a former retainer of the Ashikaga Shogunate, the Hikobe family of Shimo-Hirosawa Village, Kiryu, Kozuke Province, this paper clarifies the importance of a family history in the early-modern class system, and brings to the fore a social movement that lay behind this former retainer family’s activities.

The Hikobe family were prominent and influential farmers in Shimo-Hirosawa village, and were appointed as village officials. According to legend, however, in the Muromachi and Warring States period, the family under the surname of Takashina served in Kyoto as attendants of the Ashikaga Shogunate family, and at the end of the Warring States period, the family settled in Shimo-Hirosawa village. The family history as feudal lords shows that in the Warring States period, they were granted the Senbiki area within the Hirosawa Village by the Yura warlord clan. In addition, the historical records of 54 villages in the Kiryu domain state that for the Battle of Sekigahara, the family presented flag silks and flagstaffs. These records are a so-called “family history” and “village history,” and supported their right to rule the village, and control the silk textile industry. On the other hand, as a former retainer of the Ashikaga Shogunate family, the purpose of their fraternization with the Sakamoto family, who were Aizu domain retainers, is not exactly clear. With regard to the Sakamoto family, Yoshiaki, a wandering samurai and a great-grandchild of Yoshiaki Ashikaga, was finally accepted into government service in the Aizu domain. He was appointed by Masakata Hoshina, the lord of the domain, because of his good knowledge of Shinto studies, military science and tactics, and studies in ancient court and military practices and usage. Ashikaga Bunnaji Temple acted as an intermediary between the Sakamoto family and the Hikobe family to establish a former retainer relationship, resulting in the granting of the following rewards: omemie (privilege of having an audience with the shogun), onimai (visiting rights), grant of kamishimo (Edo-period ceremonial dress of the warrior class) and a letter of approval, and ichiji hairyo (receiving one character from their lord’s personal name to be incorporated in their name). Originally, the Hikobe family introduced advanced textile techniques and skills from Nishijin in Kyoto, and in the field of literary art, they invited scholars of the Japanese classics from Edo to Kiryu, and visited the capital to absorb its culture and to encourage the flourishing of the Japanese classics in Kiryu; they actively absorbed
and introduced the civilization and culture of the capital and thus brought prosperity to the family. It can be considered that as a former retainer, one of the purposes for the Hikobe’s activities with the Sakamoto family was to make contact with and follow their go-ahead and advanced culture. In the last days of the Tokugawa Shogunate, the heir of the Hikobe family became a vassal of the shogun, and also the heir of a samurai family. It is apparent that the family was devoted to improving their status in society; however, it is not correct if this is understood as simply providing support for the class system encouraged under the Shogunate administration. In fact, it was actually a form of resistance to the centralized exclusive system of politics, economy, and culture maintained by the samurai families, and it should be acknowledged that it was a positive aspect of this class trying to gain more control of these monopolized areas. For such trends, a qualitative commonness with the commoner movement can be found in the sense of relativization of the ruling system by the Shogunate, and it is also a social trend broadly confirmed in the East Kanto region as well as by the Hikobe family.

Key words: history, samurai family, class system, silk textiles, Japanese classics