An Analysis of the “Red Banners” (Akahata) :  
On the Function of the Color Red in Ancient Japan

OGAWA Hirokazu

This paper aims to shed light on how the understanding of the color red in ancient Japan influenced the activities of the people through an examination of the role that the red banners (akahata 赤幡) that appear in the Engishiki fulfilled in ancient society.

In ancient Japan the color red was believed to have the power to assuage the impurities found in people and things, as well as the power to protect them from external threats. It is on the basis of these purifying properties that this conception of red came to widely recognized also in folk societies, where red was used on the streets to protect the movement and circulation of people and goods from impurity. In this way, the qualities of the color red came in various contexts to be linked with political authority, and ruling over the color red and its usage became a public expression of power within the polity centered upon the monarch and his family. For this reason, red banners were only displayed on the road in occasion of royal visits and other contexts that required the highest level of purity, such as the transportation of the monarch’s meals. We think the red banners functioned as a tool to preserve the purity of the foodstuffs for the monarch and, consequently, of body of the monarch who would consume them, thus creating a clear distinction with offerings of other sorts.

In addition, starting from mid–eighth century, the red banners, which had by this time become a mark of the monarch’s meals, would also be distributed to groups involved in the production of offerings (nie 贄), known as niebito 贄人. At that time, the red banners functioned within the production activities of the niebito as circulation permits, similarly to the koshibumi no hata 腰文幡 and lineage documents obtained by niebito who weren’t members of organized groups, as seen in a directive from the Council of State issued in the seventh year of Gangyō (883). At the same time, they were an attestation of the process of institutionalization that groups of niebito were going through, and an indication of their privileged status.

Between the Engi (901–923) and Tenryaku (947–957) eras, the offices located inside the royal palace did no longer use the old koshibumi no hata as a mark for niebito, and instead switched to the red banners. We surmise that the context for this shift can be seen in the difficulties that emerged as a consequence of the process of differentiation that took place within niebito groups, who were indicated as a standard of ritual purity (kessai 潔斎) in the directive of the Council of State from 883. Using the
preparation of the monarch’s meals as a pretexts, acts meant to oppress the population were carried out by such groups, thus compromising the ritual purity that niebito were subjected to. Discourses that saw those actions as “polluting” (otoku 汚) the meals of the monarch, which required the highest level of ritual purity, started to emerge. The distribution of red banners was meant to differentiate its recipients from other administration offices, and was made necessary by this dangerous environment that had developed and that threatened the purity that was required in the preparation of food for the monarch. In this context, the color red was meant to protect and guarantee the ritual purity of the body of the niebito.

Key Words: the red banners (akahata 赤幡), a clear distinction, monarch’s meals, the transportation, groups involved in the production of offerings (nie 賛)