



Sexology versus Folklore: The Argument over a Native Conception of Gender in Early 1920s Japan

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Abstract

In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan, when parents feared their child(ren) may die before reaching adulthood, parents could raise their child(ren) as the opposite gender to bestow upon them the gods' protection and thus wish them a long life. Scholars have investigated this phenomenon by focusing on its social, cultural, and religious significance. However, experts have not studied the lively debate that the practice sparked in the early 1920s. On one side of the controversy was sexologist Sawada Junjirō (1863-1944), a vocal and prolific expounder of the science recently imported from the West, who deemed the custom an “errant belief” (meishin) that had to be eradicated from society lest it damage the public health of the “benighted people” (gumin). On the other side of the dispute was mycologist and folklorist Minakata Kumagusu (1867-1941), an eclectic thinker whose nuanced and sophisticated worldview bore the influence of Buddhism, who defended the practice as part of popular wisdom, or, in his parlance, as the “way of the people” (gushadō). By closely examining and commenting on the essays in which these intellectuals discussed the phenomenon of rearing children as the opposite gender, this paper aims at illustrating the main concepts and articulations of the Sawada-Minakata disagreement. In this manner, the paper will uncover an aspect, not yet researched, of the intensive process whereby Japanese sexologists rejected indigenous notions of gender and how instead Japanese of divergent opinions valorised their cultural heritage.

Keywords: gender and folklore; gender and religion; history of sexology in Japan; Minakata studies; societal attitudes toward gender-variance

1. Introduction

In October 1874, the “Tokyo Daily Newspaper” (*Tokyo nichichi shinbun*) told readers the unusual story of Ooto, a youth who, although anatomically male, was brought up by their parents as a girl. The reason, the article explained, was that the parents feared Ooto might die in infancy: determined to give their child a long life, the parents turned to folk wisdom, which advised them to raise the child not as boy, as was customary since they were anatomically male,

but as the opposite gender. Such a rearing method, folk wisdom maintained, would grant Ooto protection from the gods and thus help them survive to adulthood.

Almost half a century later, in 1920, Sawada Junjirō (1863-1944), a prominent sexology expert, a science newly imported from the West to Japan, harshly criticised this practice as he deemed it harmful to children's development. Moreover, he considered the custom a remnant of an archaic understanding of gender that scientific thinking should have eradicated for the sake of Japanese society.

In 1923, Minakata Kumagusu (1867-1941), a mycologist and folklorist whose worldview was deeply influenced by Mahayana Buddhism, rejected Sawada's proposition by asserting that the practice was on a par with alternative understandings of gender which were part of the cultural heritages of many cultures across the globe. Furthermore, those alternative understandings addressed different sociocultural needs. For these reasons, Minakata argued, the custom of bringing up children as the opposite gender should have been respected.

In the current state of research, the practice of raising children as the opposite gender has been studied by Gregory Pflugfelder (1999) and Mitsuhashi Junko (2008, 2022). The two experts have explored the custom as it was practised during the nineteenth century and have drawn attention to the gender-specific names and clothes the individuals so reared used and on their sexuality once they became adults.

The paper contributes to the state of the art in two ways:

- In examining the practice, the paper will argue that the individuals not only adopted gender-specific names and clothing, but also their life course was shaped according to the milestones reserved for the other gender;
- The paper will examine how the custom was discussed in the early twentieth century by scientific interpreters well versed in fields and methods recently imported from the West, a point of view which has not been applied to the phenomenon so far.

The paper will bring two main contributions:

- By showing how the life courses of individuals reared as the opposite gender were shaped according to the milestones reserved for said gender, the paper will shed light on how gender-variant people in Japanese history not only assumed clothing and names normally associated with the opposite gender, but also how their life stages were shaped by gender expectations;
- By closely examining and commenting on the essays in which Sawada and Minakata discussed the phenomenon of bringing up children as the opposite gender, this paper will uncover an aspect, not yet researched, of the intensive process whereby Japanese sexologists rejected indigenous notions of gender and how instead Japanese of divergent opinions valorised their cultural heritage.

The paper is structured in three parts:

- In the first section, the paper will closely analyse how children were raised as the opposite gender with the aid of Ooto's case study;
- In the second section, the paper will focus on Sawada's position on the matter;
- In the third section, the paper will examine Minakata's counter-opinion.

In reading the words of the two authors, the paper will illustrate the main concepts and articulations of the Sawada-Minakata disagreement and will contextualise their positions in

their worldviews and the tenets of the scientific fields within which Sawada and Minakata were active.

Before proceeding, a quick note on how the paper will refer to the phenomenon object of study. Contemporary sources did not assign a specific name to the practice of bringing up a child as the opposite gender. However, Mitsuhashi (2008, pp. 117-123; 2022, pp. 150-155) has proposed to call it *torikae kosodate*: *kosodate* means “child(ren) rearing,” while *torikae* means “to exchange” after the twelfth-century work of fiction titled *Torikaebaya monogatari*, in which the main characters, a half-sister and a half-brother, respectively grow up as a boy and a girl. Accepting Mitsuhashi’s suggestion, the paper will refer to the custom object of study as *torikae kosodate* for simplicity’s sake.

2. Methodology

The paper selected the primary sources through purposive sampling, thus choosing the works more relevant for the study, in this case the texts that contain information on *torikae kosodate* and the texts in which Sawada and Minakata discussed the topic.

The paper romanises Japanese terms following the Hepburn system, which employs English orthography to phonetically transcribe sounds. As for the English translation of Japanese, the paper adopts the translations that English speaking researchers have already offered for words relevant to the study, for example *meishin* as “errant belief” and *gumin* as “benighted folk” as translated by Gerald Figal, while it opts for a literal translation in the case of words not already examined by other researchers, for example *gushadō*, which consists of three words (*gu* - “people,” *sha* - “person,” *dō* - “way”), is translated as the “way of the folk.”

The paper adopts the standard terminology used by Japanese studies scholars to refer to Japanese history’s periodisation. In particular, the paper covers the Tokugawa or Edo period (1603-1868), the Meiji period (1868-1912), and the Taishō period (1912-1926).

The paper’s main limit is the low degree of generalisability of the results reached: the paper introduces the reader to the opinions Sawada and Minakata held on *torikae kosodate*, opinions which, while they may be of interest to gender, cultural, and intellectual historians for their nuanced sophistication, might not be considered representative of the views of the population at large.

3. Native Conception of Gender

Information about individuals reared according to *torikae kosodate* is available for the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Parents could decide to bring up their child(ren) as the opposite gender because they feared their child(ren) might die in childhood. Such fear typically arose when the child(ren) contracted a potentially life-threatening disease and/or the parents had previously lost other child(ren). In this scenario, folk wisdom advised parents to raise their child(ren) as the opposite gender in order to dedicate them to the gods in exchange for protection and in hopes their offspring would live a long life (Pflugfelder, 1999, pp. 153, 258; Mitsuhashi, 2008, pp. 117-123; Mitsuhashi, 2022, pp. 150-155).

Once they had grown up, the individuals reared according to *torikae kosodate* could decide when and whether to align their gendered roles, name, and appearance to the gender associated with their biological sex. Said individuals could do so on their coming of age ceremony, their entrance into adulthood which generally took place around their sixteenth year of age. Alternatively, they could live their life as the opposite gender well into adulthood (Pflugfelder, 1999, pp. 153, 258; Mitsuhashi, 2008, pp. 117-123; Mitsuhashi, 2022, pp. 150-155). It is the case of Ooto as shown by the following case study.

This case study is taken from the newspaper *Tokyo nichichi shinbun* n. 813 of October 3rd 1874 which told the story of Ooto, a person brought up as the opposite gender who was presumably born in the early 1850s in Shikoku, in southern Japan. Ooto was biologically male (*danshi*, “man” in the article), however they were “raised” (*sodate*) as a female (*joshi*, “woman”) because their parents were “worried [Ooto] would die” (*naki wo ureite*; Takahashi, 1992, pp. 136-137).

To rear their child as a girl/young woman, Ooto’s parents and Ooto themselves took the following steps:

- The parents chose the feminine name Ooto; the prefix O- was used in numerous girls and women’s names; Ooto means “last,” it is possible that the parents had previously lost other child(ren) and wished Ooto would survive as their lost child;
- The parents taught Ooto how to look feminine in their appearance and bearing, having them:
 - wear long hair;
 - wear hair accessories;
 - wear clothes appropriate for the cold and hot weather;
- The parents taught Ooto how to sew, an activity which was deemed typically feminine;
- At eighteen years old, Ooto worked in another house as a “maidservant” (*hōkō*), a line of work which was generally available for young girls and women;
- Ooto married a man; the husband was aware of Ooto’s anatomically male sex and the couple was apparently recorded in the family register as being composed of husband (Ooto’s partner) and wife (Ooto; Takahashi, 1992, pp. 136-137).

Ooto followed the life course girls/women followed during the Tokugawa period:

- At birth, young girls received a gender-specific name, which was used until they received an equally gender-specific name once they were adult, commonly after marriage (Roberts, 2017, pp. 45-46; Walthall, 1991, p. 44); Ooto is a feminine sounding name, even though it is not clear if it was a child or adult name;
- In childhood, from approximately six or seven years of age, girls were taught how to dress and behave in a feminine-coded manner and were taught gender-specific activities, among which was weaving (Kimbrough, 2019, pp. 51-52; Walthall, 2017, pp. 64-67, 71; Yonemoto, 2010, p. 46; Uno, 1991, p. 31; Walthall, 1991, pp. 44-46; Birge, 1989, p. 333); although the *Tokyo nichichi shinbun* journalist did not indicate the age at which Ooto was trained in these matters, Ooto similarly learned how to dress and behave like a girl and how to sew;
- In their teens, girls could be hired in others’ houses to perform different kinds of work, which generally were useful both as a source of income for the girls and their families as well as to improve the girls’ etiquette, which had important sociocultural value (Kojima, 2003, pp. 120-121; Uno, 1991, pp. 27-28, 34-35; Walthall, 1991, pp. 48-50); Ooto was analogously employed as a maidservant at eighteen;
- In their late teens and early twenties, generally after a short term of a year or two, girls and young women could leave employment to marry (Smith, 1977, p. 93); similarly, Ooto left their employment to get married.

In conclusion, Ooto not only assumed a feminine name and appearance, as Pflugfelder and Mitsuhashi have proposed, but also followed the life course, punctuated by the milestones and

the gendered stages of childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, which girls and young women generally followed in Tokugawa Japan.

4. Sawada's Position

Sawada Junjirō was a prominent sexology researcher active in the 1910s and 1920s. Although he did not possess a higher educational degree and in early 1900s occupied a relatively low position as teacher of natural sciences at a public school, in the 1910s and 1920s he was at the center of the sexology field in Japan, being chair of the Japanese Society of Sexology and having high-profile connections in the world of natural science (Algozo, 2014, pp. 95-96).

Sawada's academic production is usually distinguished in two phases:

- During the first phase, which corresponds to the works he composed in the 1910s, Sawada attempted to establish a field called in Japanese *seibetsugaku*. Literally meaning the “study of the division between the sexes,” Sawada aimed at methodically delineating the categories into which humanity could be divided, i.e. male and female, and establishing the appropriate and immutable gender roles for each as decreed by biology as destiny (Algozo, 2014, pp. 95-96; Akagawa, 1999, p. 175);
- In the second phase, which corresponds to the works he published in the 1920s, Sawada engaged himself with “popular sexology” (*tsūzoku seiyokugaku*), a movement which aimed at spreading knowledge about the science of sex among non-experts so to gain data, legitimacy, and status for the sake of sexology advocates (Algozo, 2014, pp. 95-96, 137; Frühstück, 2003, p. 112; Frühstück, 2000, pp. 333, 344, 346, 350-351; Akagawa, 1999, p. 175).

Sawada wrote about *torikae kosodate* in a book which belonged to this second phase of his production, the second volume of *Mystery of Homosexuality* (*Shinpi naru dōseiai*), published in 1920. In this work, Sawada referred to the practice as *meishin* (Sawada, 1920, p. 4). Literally translatable as “errant belief,” *meishin* constituted a keyword in the dictionary of social reformers and critics active in the second half of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan.

Meishin referred to beliefs and customs which were current in Edo Japan but became discredited with the importation of Western science and standards. For example, in 1876 the Ministry of Doctrine abolished certain practices carried out by mountain and itinerant ascetics such as fortune-telling, prayer healing, and mediums in an effort to reform Buddhism on the model of Protestantism and Western science. The Ministry deemed such customs as harmful to the masses who still clinged to them, masses which were commonly called, in the works of the social reformers of the day, *gumin* or “benighted folk” (Wu, 2022, pp. 123-124; Maxey, 2014, pp. 96, 99-100, 106, 121; Josephson, 2006, pp. 152-153; Figal, 1999, pp. 41, 43-44, 51-52).

Gumin is a derogative term which calls the “masses” (*gu*) literally as “asleep” or “benighted” (*min*), in other words ignorant (Josephson, 2006, p. 158). Since the people were believed to be gullible to such damaging practices, social reformers such as the Ministry of Doctrine and social critics such as Sawada took it upon themselves to attack said customs to protect the common person. In writing disparagingly about *torikae kosodate*, Sawada held a position of scientific and moral authority from which he condemned the custom and implicitly advised his readers not to practise it for their own good.

Sawada presumably considered *torikae kosodate* as dangerous because it brought about confusion in the gender roles of men and women, which Sawada saw as predetermined by nature. In *The Theory of Sexual Perversion* (*Hentai seiyokuron*), Sawada's major work he co-

authored in 1915, the sexologist wrote that if men and women would not perform the roles and activities socially and culturally assigned to them, which the author deemed as inscribed in individuals by nature, the social order would collapse (Roden, 1990, pp. 45-46). Plausibly, Sawada considered *torikae kosodate* as a catalyst of change, and thus instability, in the activities and roles performed by men and women.

5. Minakata's Counter-Opinion

Minakata Kumagusu conducted his studies from a theoretical stance which was opposite to the one assumed by Sawada:

- While Sawada was integrated in the academic milieu, Minakata did not pursue higher academic studies as a form of rejection of Social Darwinism and the eurocentrism Japan had imposed on herself (Honda, 2023, p. 1106);
- Whereas Sawada tried to impose an ideological order on Japanese society, Minakata applied the observations he drew from the study of molds with their phantasmagoric and never-ending diversity to the way he viewed and interpreted human society as a site of constant change (Honda, 2023, pp. 1107-1008, 1111-1112; Figal, 1999, pp. 53, 70-71);
- While Sawada relied on the Western scientific method, Minakata utilised Mahayana Buddhism as a theoretical lens which allowed him to appreciate human phenomena as diverse but interconnected (Honda, 2023, pp. 1106, 1123; Figal, 1999, pp. 53-54).

Minakata applied this universalising stance on the exploration of *torikae kosodate* in *Folklore and Legends about the Pig (Inoshishi ni kan suru minzoku to densetsu)*, an article Minakata published in 1923 on the magazine *Sun (Taiyō)* as part of a series of studies on the symbolism associated with the signs of the Chinese zodiac (Minakata, 1994, pp. 399-400).

Minakata approached his discussion of *torikae kosodate* by contextualising his intervention within a wider debate on cross-dressing as practised in Japan and in other countries. Minakata opened the discussion by reporting a personal event, when he climbed Mount Hakone at the time he was a high schooler. He wrote that, in 1829, on the same spot where he had stood, a woman disguised herself as a boy to cross a barrier, as crossing barriers was prohibited to women who did not carry a specific permit (Minakata, 1994, p. 330).

After this opening, Minakata reported several episodes of cross-dressing taken from Japanese mythology and literature as well as from other countries. For example, he cited the case of Yamato Takeru, a tragic hero from *An Account of Ancient Matters (Kojiki, 712)*, the oldest extant text in Japanese history, who disguised himself as a maiden to slay his enemies. Minakata then mentioned a custom practised in women-only living quarters in Egypt. According to laws in force in the country, men were forbidden to enter women-only living quarters, even husbands of women who resided in these structures. To get around this rule, men dressed as women while at the same time formally respecting the regulation (Minakata, 1994, pp. 330-331).

Minakata subsumed these different examples of cross-dressers under two concepts found in premodern Japanese culture:

- The word *futanari*, literally “double form,” which was used in Buddhist scriptures to refer to hermaphrodites (Kiyasu & Yamamoto, 2017, p. 13);
- The word *enjin*, which indicated eunuchs employed in Chinese harems (Minakata, 1994, p. 331).

Minakata reclaimed native and universal conceptions of gender that had been discarded in favour of ideas imported from the Western sciences.

It was at this point that Minakata discussed the Japanese practice of *torikae kosodate*: Minakata wrote that such custom was found across numerous countries. To back this assertion up, Minakata mentioned an article published on *Nature*, the premier natural sciences journal, to which Minakata regularly contributed, that discussed a similar practice as found abroad. With this rhetorical move, Minakata lent academic validity to his thesis (Minakata, 1994, p. 334).

To conclude his line of argumentation, Minakata subsumed these phenomena under an umbrella term, *gushadō* or the “way of the folk,” a word Minakata coined to counter-attack the use of *gumin* associated with Sawada’s disparaging use of *meishin* (Minakata, 1994, p. 335). *Gu*, the same first word in the compound *gumin*, indicated the “people;” *sha* referred similarly to “people” and, in comparison with *gumin*, removed the derogative *min* “benighted” with a more neutral word; finally, *dō* meant “way,” a term frequently used in different fields developed in premodern Japan, for example *Bushidō* or the “way of the warrior,” to indicate a discipline of mind and body which brought spiritual and ethical rewards to those who followed its path (Pflugfelder, 1999, p. 28).

By using the term *gushadō*, Minakata effectively reversed Sawada’s use of *meishin*: no longer a hurtful custom practised by gullible people, *torikae kosodate* was recast by Minakata as the result of popular wisdom, a custom which, alongside concepts coined in the supposedly prescientific premodern Japan, responded to specific sociocultural needs and could provide positive effects.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the custom known as *torikae kosodate*, a custom passed down in folk wisdom and practised in Japan at least during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Following said custom, parents could raise their child(ren) as the opposite sex in case they feared their offspring might die in infancy, as such a rearing method was believed to grant the child divine protection. Studying the case of Ooto, the paper has shown how such individuals brought up as the opposite gender not only took names and wore clothes which were typically reserved for the opposite gender, but also argued, in what is the paper’s first contribution to the state of the art, that persons so reared followed the stages of the life course that were commonly followed by the opposite gender.

Furthermore, the paper has explored the debate over *torikae kosodate* that took place in the early 1920s between sexologist Sawada Junjirō and mycologist and folklorist Minakata Kumagusu. On one side of the disagreement, Sawada suggested *torikae kosodate* brought confusion in the gendered socialisation of children and potentially in society at large. As a consequence, Sawada considered the practice an “errant belief,” *meishin*, a remnant of a prescientific culture which should have been eradicated for the sake of the whole Japanese society. On the other side of the argument, Minakata assumed a position completely opposite to that of Sawada: in the mycologist’s view, *torikae kosodate* was part of the “way of the people,” *gushadō*, i.e. the result of popular wisdom which fulfilled a precise role in society and which found numerous analogies in many cultures across the globe. For these reasons, Minakata concluded, the custom deserved respect. By closely examining the concepts and the articulations with which the two thinkers defended their opinions, the paper has brought a second contribution to the state of the art by uncovering an aspect of the intensive process whereby Japanese sexologists rejected indigenous notions of gender and how instead Japanese of divergent opinions valorised their cultural heritage.

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