

THE POPULATION GROWTH AND THE DEVELOPMENT  
OF THE FAMILY SYSTEM IN JAPAN

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I

The family system has undergone a characteristic development in Japan, dating back to the very olden days. So, to begin with, I ought to touch with its development.

Just the same as with all the other races, the Japanese people comprised groups of kith and kin. These were called "uji". They were led by their own "heads of uji", just the same as in the case of many social communities. The leadership of the head of "uji" resembled "pater familias" of the ancient Rome on the whole.

It is believed that an extremely long period elapsed until these groups of kith and kin were consolidated into the powerful Japanese people who were the distant ancestors of the royal family of today. A record tells us that it was in the year 652 that a census registration was started in this country for the first time, but only a fragment of such registration taken in the year 702 remains today.

"Ié" consisted of one called "gôko" and the other called "bôko" which belonged to "gôko". The head of "gôko" had presumably represented the whole house while the latter, i.e. bôko was dependent upon the former. The remaining fragments of census registration are so few that no conclusion can be decisively arrived at in this respect, but they were at any rate large families. The size of gôko was not uniform. Maybe some gôko covered their whole villages. So it came to happen that a gôko comprised many families. They seldom lived together in one house, its membership counting more than a dozen. In this respect, it differs from the large family system prevalent in China. However, the master of gôko enjoyed a fairly powerful influence over the whole family, and it was common that all the properties of a house were jointly possessed. According to the census registration taken in about the eighth century, there were some families which had already included different kins and slaves.

At this point, the central idea of the Japanese "Ié" needs a brief explanation. The chief of a house ought to be a spiritual follower of his own ancestors. They had a belief that the soul (tama) of ancestors dwells in the bodies of descendants. Of course, the relation of kith and kin was held in high esteem as before, but the chief of a house (ié no chôja) must inherit the soul of his ancestors, though this does not mean that he must be the eldest of the family. It is in the ceremony of accession to the throne that this idea still survives. Needless to say that it is attributable to the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. It also is a remote cause of the fact that ié had become quite independent of the blood relation later on.

As a rule, Japan suffers very much from frequent natural calamities, and her climate makes things more corruptible than anywhere else. Any substance is scarcely durable here. So the durable are such shapeless things as soul, name, etc. in this country. Above all, as to the latter, i.e. name, there had been a jealous attitude to esteem it as a result of the influence of the Chinese ideology. The family name had become a subject of urgent attachment until quite recently. This conviction is perhaps answerable for making the Japanese people to esteem their name in defiance of death, although they are practical people. More than that, this fundamental ideology tended to influence the character of "i<sup>é</sup>" later on.

It seems that a rapid increase was made in the population of the old times, though no exact figures are, of course, available at present. There also were some immigrants from Korea and China while some members of the old "i<sup>é</sup>" removed all over the country. The nature of this country made it hard for the increased members to live together near their old house. Most of them were obliged to go away and settle down in fairly distant places, making use of coastal navigation. They went away, taking the same god of ancestor-worship as their head house's with them. They believed that the tama was divisible. In the light of the fact that their gods of ancestor worship still remain today, it is ascertained that they emigrated to very distant places along the coast.

## II

It seems that, with the advent of the tenth century, the system of "i<sup>é</sup>" began to undergo some changes gradually. The practical power rather than the mystical power was deemed to be of more importance for the purpose of maintaining social influence. The system of concentrating on the head of uji (chief of a clan) was still holding its place among the lords whose highest honor was to become the head of their uji. However, there was a persistent tendency among the provincial squires to keep their "i<sup>é</sup>" by dint of practical power while the general public seemed to be rather less interested in their own houses.

It comes under notice that a quite different tendency arose about the i<sup>é</sup> during the mediaeval age. In order to give the i<sup>é</sup> full swing, the clans began to adopt others who had no blood relation whatever with them. One is the yūshi system. It is a mere forming of the relation of parent and child, differing a bit from that of foster-child and rather resembling to that of godfather and godmother prevalent in Europe. It is traced back to the eboshi-oya, i.e. the ancient system of asking others to become parents to crown one's children at the ceremony of manhood when children were of age. In other words, the yūshi system was nothing but a contract of those parent and child who were not of the same blood. As a result, the same relation as that of parent and child of one blood issue. The other is the change brought about in the relation of master and servant.

Those hereditary subjects called "ié-no-ko" or "rôtô" are traced back to the slavery system. They had gradually gained their influences over the "ié" living in the same house generation after generation. The *raison d'être* of these subjects is explained by the fact that military power was of great importance while agriculture in Japan depended upon a great deal of labor, farming being pursued in paddyfields. In this way, the system of one whole clan under the same chief was born. It is believed that these things have contributed much to the transformation of the "ié".

A certain "ié" had developed into a great clan, taking such measures as follows. When his eldest son is of age to be independent, the parent removes to a nearby wilderness, transferring all the effects of his head house to the son and taking all his children except the eldest with him. There he builds up another house, for he is still able to work. In those days, powerful rivals were often involved in most raging conflicts in the provinces, control by the central government gradually losing force. Such conflicts took place in some provinces even before the tenth century. So it was not rare that cultivated lands were left again to wilderness. But, in both the eastern district and the Kantô district of Honshû, the above-mentioned tendency was very obvious in developing the "ié" and the "ié" was enlarged, cultivating one wilderness after another. There were two cases, that is to say one case in which the eldest son became the central figure of his whole house, getting the position of the head house transferred to him, and the other case in which the parent still maintained the head house, all his grown-up children inclusive of the eldest having left to live somewhere else. The former case gave birth to the custom of primogeniture and the latter case the custom of inheritance by the last-born. These cases were not necessarily in perfect proportion in the provinces. The case of primogeniture was rather predominant.

When one clan grew up in this way, all its branch houses were consolidated together strategically around the head house. It might not be really so simple as mentioned above, but anyhow they were joined together with the "sôryô" (successor) of the head house as their central figure. They were called so-and-so "tô". Such "tô" as Shinô and Tan were powerful in the provinces, each quite intent on developing its own "tô".

Even at present, there are some places called "kaito". The word means "enclosed" or "fenced in", and once upon a time someone with power enclosed a spot in the wilderness calling it his "kaito" and prohibited others to trespass it. The "kaito" differed from each other more or less locally, but, in the highly cultured Yamato-Kinai district such sphere of control as belonged to the head house as the centre of a clan was presumably represented by this particular word and later the subordinates to a house also were called "kaito" in certain provinces. Anyhow, the consolidation was quite indispensable both for land development and military predominance, thus the "ié" had gradually developed itself to have a meaning other than a mere group of kith and kin.

As to the population in the mediaeval age, it may be said that there is neither record nor datum at all. Although they took a census of the population within their own domains for this or that reason, no record was kept, their being feudal communities. So, as to the contents of the "ié" mentioned above, only such military command thereof could be

ascertained in view of the fact that the prestige of the sôryô's house was pretty strong. It seems that there was no great increase in the population on account of constant wars, plagues, natural disasters, etc. Once in the fourteenth century, those failures at home were ambitious enough to intend an overseas development, embarking themselves in small boats in groups. Although they turned out to be the pirates who looted the Asiatic coast, including Korea and China, their departure from home may be deemed as a sort of outlet of the surplus population. It is very interesting to notice that it coincided with the overseas development of certain European nations.

An outline of the development of the family system in Japan previous to the seventeenth century has been referred to above. It was not until the isolated nations of ours was declared and established to continue for two hundred and several scores of years during the age of Tokugawa Shogunate that the "iê" system became the firm foundation for the Japanese life. The above-mentioned only concern those that played most important roles in completing the family system in the said Tokugawa age. The points in question may be enumerated as follows; that is to say, (1) inheritance of the "iê" born of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul of ancestors was replaced by inheritance of a material possession, (2) the "iê" was enlarged to include others than the blood relations and (3) the fact that cooperative work was done with the sôryô's house at its centre.

Previous to the mediaeval age, the relation of an individual with the "iê" was, of course, subordinate, just the same as in the case of individuals in Europe during the mediaeval age, so that there is no need for repetition. In short, individuals exist for the sake of the "iê" and the "iê" not for the sake of individuals. It is quite a matter of course that everything was considered with a view to the "iê", in defiance of individuals. That this tendency was strengthened more than before in the Tokugawa age beginning with the seventeenth century was one of the reasons why Japan was slow to participate in the activities of the modern world.

### III

It may safely be said that the family system was almost perfectly completed through every stratum of society in Japan in the Tokugawa age. And it was veritably backed by economical causes. The "iê" was no mere group of blood relations any longer, and it became the means of great importance to have and hold the family occupation attached to the "iê".

Samurai used to receive a stipend belonging to his "iê". And the estates held by those higher samurai also belonged to their "iê". In those days, everything was valued with the standard of rice. Including great daimios receiving rice of million koku down to petty samurai with their rations for a number of persons, they lived on their family stipends inherited generation after generation. To inherit and maintain his family stipend was the heir's sublime duty. Extinction of the "iê" means loss of one's stipend by this or that reason, not annihilation of one's blood relations.



It also was so in the case of peasants. They owned their farms which were valued with the rice standard, their farm-lands being called "productive of so-and-so koku of rice". The valuation of samurai's stipend was made in the same way as the case of peasant's farm-land from which samurai had a right to collect rice as the land tax. The lands owned by peasants were appraised at so-and-so koku as their assets. So a peasant with his assets of twenty koku was higher placed than his neighbour with his assets of five koku in the social scale. Just the same as in the case of samurai, it was the peasant's duty to receive and maintain such assets of his "ié" generation after generation. A peasant with no family assets was called "mudaka", "iekari" etc. (an unpropertied peasant) and his social position was extremely low.

There were naturally limits for both samurai and peasant to enlarge their "ié", keeping pace with the increase of the population. In early times, there was enough room for exploitation of new farms to keep pace with any increased number of children, but the limits were soon reached when it was found hard for younger children except the eldest to branch away. If they were to branch away, they must, as a matter of fact, decrease the head house's assets. In order to check the growth of petty farmers, "bakufu" (the government) prohibited partition and sale of land, but the law did not work very effectively. So far as samurai's dependence on land was concerned, samurai showed no difference from peasant. Therefore, for younger children except the eldest of both samurai and peasant, there was no way but falling back on their eldest or looking for employment in cities.

On the other hand, townsfolk (tradesmen and artisans) made best use of the branch family system to hold and maintain their "ié" for ever. In those days, the apprentice system was prevalent here just the same as in Europe of the mediaeval age. An apprentice was promoted to an assistant-clerk and an assistant-clerk to a clerk, and such a clerk branched away from the head "ié" to establish another "ié". It was called "shike" or "bekke" (cadet house or separate house) to discriminate it from the branch house of blood relations. These cadet house branched off the head house had usually the same shop-name banded together around the head house. Besides, there was of course a sort of quasi-guild, but a true mutual help was rendered by these cadet or separate houses gathered around the head house. In normal times, they were protected somehow by the head house, but, if the head house was in crisis, they would spare no efforts to help it regardless of their own interests. In the case of trademan's "ié", there was no fixed family stipend, quite contrary to the case of samurai and peasant. In short, the value of his family occupation was represented by a sort of credit called "noren" (sign-curtain) of the head house. So it became a duty of the man who succeeded to the house to maintain his "noren" in the market. In this respect, establishment of cadet house was a mean to secure the market more and more so that it may be affirmed that trademan got more chance of development than samurai and peasant. However, in those days, business was confined to the home market and so possibly of trademan's development by means of the cadet house system was also limited. The fertility of trademen dwelt in cities was not so great while their death-rate was so high that they were afraid they might have no heir.

As related above, the continuation of the "ié" was deemed to be of most importance through all the classes of samurai, peasant and tradesman. One's heaviest duty was to relay one's family occupation safely from ancestors to descendants, and not to stain one's family name. Consequently, they thought that a natural heir was a matter of utmost importance. The wife must give birth to her eldest son, and it was often the man's privilege to keep concubine, if his wife was sterile. There is even a proverb that says a sterile wife may be divorced. Therefore, the wife's domestical position was lower than that of her son with due heirship.

In those days, the system of heirship followed the line of primogeniture on the whole. There were certain districts where the old system of inheritance by the last-born still prevailed. But it was an exception; Therefore, that is the reason why the first-born was called "sôryô". But "sôryô" was not necessarily fit to succeed his family occupation. It was possible that he might disgrace his "ié". So such systems as disinheritorship and disowning were given birth to. Disinheritorship means that the first-born is driven into retirement and succession handed over to the second son or any other while disowning means cutting off the relation of parent and child. The parent is not responsible at all for his disowned child. On the other hand, the adoption system was utilized to find a heir for the sake of continuation of the family occupation. Somebody with no blood-relation was adopted to have the same relation as that of parent and child. The adopted child was required to be more dutiful to foster-parents than to blood parents.

They did not hesitate to get relays for their family occupation and name at the expense of blood relations so that there were many cases in which the "ié" was succeeded by quite a different blood. Such tendency was obvious among samurai and tradesmen who dwelt in cities. It was so even among peasants, but not so obvious as among townsfolk, for their birth-rate was high and they were always a source of supply of the population to cities.

#### IV

How did such family system influence the life of those peasants who shared about 80 per cent of the whole population then? As to the case of farm-villages, there were several old homesteads in such a village. They were the head houses, to some of which other houses belonged. Even in these farm-villages, each farm-house was apparently independent, and the members of one family about ten at most and four or five on the average as today. The large family system still survived in certain mountain villages, but such cases were extremely rare. As a rule, the small family system prevailed. The consumptive economy of each family was managed independently. However, most of the events of the village were performed in the head house at its centre, necessary labor or service being supplied gratis by all subordinate houses. The head house was called "toya", "omoya" or "oyakata". Festivals of the village were usually sponsored and held by the oyakata by turns.

Here a little explanation is necessary about the relation between oyabun and kobun (boss and followers). As related above, the relation of parent and child could be made in the Japanese "i<sup>e</sup>", not necessarily relying on blood. It was, of course, a fiction of the law. This relation of parent and child spread high and low in Japan. Beginning with the relation between lord and retainer, the system covered all such relations as between teacher and disciple, master and servant, land-lord and tenant, landowner and tenant-farmer. The former should assist and protect the latter while the latter must be very obedient to the former like a child, it was believed. This is obviously attributable to the influence of Confusianism which was then the leading ideology in this country. The family idea got rooted deeply in the thoughts of the whole nation.

More than that, the parental authority was very great in those days. In the light of the doctrine that "Filial piety is the source of all virtues", absolute obedience to the parents was deemed the highest morality. Among other things, it was believed that, for the sake of the succession of the "i<sup>e</sup>", it is a righteous duty for a child to make a victim of itself at the command of its parents. Even if the parents' command was unjust, the child should obey it willy-nilly, when pressed by the parents, though it could remonstrate once or twice. A story of a daughter sold into slavery for the sake of her parents was thought praiseworthy in the bygone days.

When augmented in general, the relation between parent and child grew into the relation between boss and follower. Once relied upon, one must obey one's boss willy-nilly and the boss has to take full care of his follower. This did not concern the farm-villages alone, it was all the same in cities. It was, as a matter of fact, a variety of the family system, such a group of boss and followers was called so-and-so family.

There was no need for them to make any relation of boss and followers in the farm-villages in this country, for most of them, were comparatively small. There were even such cases in which whole villages comprised the same blood. The attitude of its master to the member of such an "i<sup>e</sup>" was just the same as that of parent to child.

As the productive power was on the increase until early in the eighteenth century, that is to say the former half of the Tokugawa age, even the existence of many parasites had presented no serious problem, but the spongers had hard times in the latter half of the same age when the productive power stopped to increase. In spite of it and also in accordance with the "i<sup>e</sup>" system or in obedience to the prevailing social morality, poverty-stricken fellow-members were still able to sponge on and get assistance from the richer. So they could get along in their village, if satisfied with the lowest standard of living.

In the period of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, the population showed an increase, in spite of the fact that mabiki (infanticide) and abortion prevailed because of dire poverty, or in spite of much frequency of plagues and natural disasters. However, one may hint that a Malthusian tendency was taking place more or less in Japan. Her surplus population was put under control only by dint of the extreme lowering of the level of living. The registered population came to a standstill plainly shown by Malthus. The non-registered population - those called "mushiku" or "yadonashi" (both

meaning rogues or vagabonds) - depended upon parasitism. One may affirm that this had brought about the general lowering of the level of living in Japan. On the other hand, the death-rate increased on account of the said lowering of the level of living while the birth-rate showed no decrease. They were not very seriously responsible both for child-birth and bringing up their children.

As related above, one may say that the Japanese family system was completed as a social solidarity system in the Tokugawa age in a way. (1) The well-to-do of one family were always responsible for relief of their blood relations, and (2) the oyabun entered into the fictional relations of parent and child had always to protect those involved in the said relation. They found it important to strengthen such system in the then society entirely devoid of any means of social policy or of any insurance system. The system had resulted in such great evils as giving birth to many parasites looking for the "i6", their last shelter, narrow-minded exclusionism based on the "i6" as the centre of their activities and rise of the boss class everywhere, but, in our opinion, it was quite indispensable to have some means of relief in this country frequented by natural disasters. So such private relations were made and based on the old tradition of the nation for almost all governmental facilities fell short of relief. No one can deny that the deep-rooted system could not be easily dispensed with.

## V

A shade of individualism was beginning to influence the totalitarian ideology based on the "i6" in the latter half of the Tokugawa age when the monetary economy underwent a considerable development and the capitalistic tendency was budding in this country. But these things chiefly concerned the few of townsfolk alone, the majority not affected at all. On the occasion of the so-called Meiji Restoration, the European culture was introduced wholesale and the fundamental reform was tried everywhere. In the year 1871, all feudalistic clans were abolished and the central government was established. The leading ideology was the individualistic liberalism sponsored by Rousseau, Bentham, J.S. Mill, etc. Therefore, at the very beginning, fairly radical discussions prevailed, some of which were carried into effect.

When reform of the law of succession was discussed in 1876, the old family system was on the verge of a clean sweep. The Meiji civil law enacted in 1890 and then in 1898 contained the regulations of the right of succession to a house with the intention of keeping the principles of succession of hereditary stipends of the Tokugawa age, though hereditary stipends were abolished in fact. That is to say there are succession to a house and succession to inheritance, and the successor to a house was guaranteed to receive a certain legacy, if there was a will of the succeeded about succession to inheritance, and, in the case of single succession, the inheritance was inseparable. On the other hand, it was his duty to support the members of his family and to hold festivals involving his house.



In spite of the fact that no property belonging to a house was lawfully confirmed, recognition of such an old-fashioned principle is perhaps attributable to the virtual existence of the old family system in the world and to a strong tendency to deem the affectional side of the family system as a custom of merit. Of course, the law itself cannot be said to be preponderant of the first-born, but the customs of the old family system were veritably recognized by the law as beautiful customs and so a tendency towards preponderance of the first-born survives. However, as the first-born was the successor to his house, he was more or less a stickler for his family occupation, not being able to select his occupation of his own accord. In other words, the Meiji civil law played a role in retaining both the system of "ié" and the idea of "ié" of the Tokugawa age.

It was only after the Meiji era that, along with the growth of the capitalistic system in Japan, an individualistic tendency came to the fore and that some of them were trying to free themselves from the fetters of the system of "ié". It had inevitably resulted in some domestic tragedies large and small between father and son, or among blood brothers and sisters around their house. In parallel with the growth of modern nationalism, the tendency to support the family system revived more strongly than before, which has been a beautiful custom ever since the olden days. Driven between these two opposing tendencies, the system of "ié" was destined to destruction somehow in the cities where the industry flourished while it was maintained solidly in the provinces, especially the agricultural zones. It was general social idea that "family assets" were handed down from their forefathers, belonging to no head of any family.

As a result, the grown-up sons were placed under protection by the "ié" and could be employed in work at the minimum wages, and the unemployed went home to render a helping hand to the family occupation so that the unemployed could not be exactly registered. In this respect, the individual became half parasitic, devoid of the perfect personality of an independent man. The new civil law of 1947 was drawn up with the intention of giving a fatal blow to the family system, striking out an absolutely small family system. And the old succession to a house was abolished, adhering to the principle of divided succession. This measure was hard to accept in the agricultural communities, though it was received in the cities without much ado. In a word, division of land is no easy job and the peasants themselves are quite indifferent to the new civil law. So it is still a question how far the reform will possibly remedy the old evils.

As referred to above, the people still cling to the family system so overwhelmingly that there is a tendency to support the increasing population by means of lowering their level of living. In this respect, the problem is still left unsolved, though it is not so serious as it was in the Tokugawa age. Above all, the progress of medical science has resulted in an abrupt decline of death-rate. On the other hand, birth-rate also tends to decline, though not greatly. So how to solve the problem is a harassing trouble for all of us.