

The Tanabata and Bon Festivals : A Study from the Perspective of their Relationship to Water

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In the study of folklore, the perspective of 'life, death, and water' has been discussed since Shinobu Orikuchi (1887 - 1953) and Kunio Yanagita (1875 - 1962), because it has been believed that, in Japan, human life and death are closely related to our perception and feeling of water.

This paper attempts to understand and integrate two of Japan's annual events celebrated in July, namely the Tanabata and Bon Festivals, within the overall framework of the Bon Festival. These two festivals are deeply related to water, and associated with *seirei* (good ancestral spirits), and *reibutsu* (evil spirits that bring misfortune and mischief). There has been a continuing tendency to simplify the two festivals by assigning them to a specific deity, the water god (*Suijin*), and considering them as rituals. However, in light of the accumulated folklore research results, it is essential to reevaluate July as the month of the Bon Festival by reconfirming the following two perspectives. One is the that of Yanagita and Orikuchi, which conceives of the yearly cycle as essentially defined by the *Ichinenryobunsei* (in the Gregorian calendar, the year runs from January to December; but in this Japanese lunar calendar, the year is divided in two, January to June and July to December, by the Bon Festival) and *Sakuboujogenkagen* (moon phases defined by a weekly cycle). The second sees the logic of 'repetition' as lying at the root of annual events.

In this study, we first considered the relationship between the Tanabata Festival on the 7th of July, and the Bon Festival events on the 15th and 16th of July. Water-related events on the 7th of July (e.g., the *Neburinagashi*) have a strong sense of *zatsureibarae* (purification of various evil spirits) before the Bon Festival, and *kichijibarae* (purification before anything important) to welcome the *seirei*. In other words, Orikuchi did not consider these water-related events as water-god rituals but *kichijibarae* to await the coming of deities and auspicious events, and the water is used for *misogi*. We can find many such examples in actual folklore events. Second, we investigated the tradition of *tanabatatsume-no-kashikosode* (kimono lending), which is closely related to water and still widely practiced in many parts of Japan. It can be seen that the distribution of Tanabata kimonos, dolls, and horses, which are used in this custom, varies from region to region in the East and West of Japan. We also noted that the Tanabata event has been passed on with the following two significations: the Tanabata kimono signifies the *tanabatatsume* (one who weaves while waiting for a deity to come), and the Tanabata dolls

and horses are used in *misogiharae* (a series of purification ceremonies), which combine *zatsureibarae* and *kichijibarae*, before the Bon Festival, to welcome *seirei*.

Key words: Tanabata Festival, Bon Festival, the logic of 'repetition', *kichijibarae*, Tanabata kimono, Tanabata uma