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**In Search of Japan’s Origin**

by Y.D. Kim

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INTRODUCTION

Over the years, out of my own curiosity, as well as several RAS tours to Japan, I’ve gathered many materials in order to satisfy my interest that through understanding the origin of Japan’s people and culture we could also find ways of understanding the culture of Korea.

The cultural history of Japan is divided into four periods:

a. Jomon period, eightieth century B.C.E. to third century B.C.E.

b. Yayoi period from third century B.C.E. to third century C.E.

c. Kofun period from fourth century C.E. to seventh century C.E.

d. Asuka period 600 C.E. to 710 C.E.

Despite the paucity of written documents from the ancient period, much can be known about all these periods due to the continued activities of more than five thousand people engaged in archeological research throughout Japan.

In this paper I will sketch some of the more interesting findings on Japan’s origin in terms of the Korean perspective.

(I) Jomon period (8000 B.C.E. to 300 B.C.E.)1

Jomon refers to the typical cord motif on the potteries of this period.

As the last glacial period receded about fifteen thousand years ago, the land bridge from the Korean peninsula to Japan became immersed in water and the islands of Japan were formed. Pottery culture started early in [page 90] Japan—one of the earliest in the world. With the emergence of pottery the Neolithic culture began to be transformed. The warmer and wetter climate provided a better living environment for the foragers of this period. They engaged in essentially a life of hunting, fishing and gathering. At first this seems to have been by separate family groups, but eventually they began to form collective dwelling areas, living in pit houses. These early people left many sites with their pottery artifacts such as pots, ornamental earrings or neck rings together with stone axes and stone arrowheads, etc. In each small village the shell middens or garbage dumps of these people have also been found. A rough picture of the population of the Jomon period can be discerned from the number of sites and also the human remains discovered. A typical estimate of the population is twenty thousand people about ten thousand years ago. About four thousand years later the population seems to have increased to about two hundred sixty thousand but afterward it seems to decrease to about sixty five thousand toward the end of the Jomon period circa fourth century B.C.E. What happened to these people? This is when the Yayoi period begins with rice cultivation introduced to Japan from Korea. Many archeological sites of rice cultivation have been found from the earliest stages of this period on the northern coastal areas of Kyushu.

Jomon sites are densely distributed more to the central and north eastern part of the Japanese islands in the early Jomon period but eventually the density of these sites shifts to the Kyushu area. Surprisingly the earliest Jomon site is found at Kagoshima in the southern end of Kyushu. Does this mean that Jomon culture started from this area? Latest genetic studies links these people to natives of Okinawa islands.

As to the physical characteristics of the Jomon people many studies were made on the skeletons of the people of this period. These studies suggest that the Jomon people were rather short in stature—about 155 to 160 cm in height—with the high eyebrows, narrow foreheads and broad faces typical of mongoloidal people. Jomon people declined in number to the ratio of ten to twenty percent of taller people who introduced rice culture from the Korean peninsula at the dawn of Yayoi period about four hundred B.C.E.

One of the latest studies of the mitochondria of DNA of both Japanese and Korean races matches within eighty to ninety percent.

It is also interesting to note that Jomon-type pottery and fishing hooks are found at Korean Neolithic sites such as the Tongsamdong shell middens in Pusan, suggesting that there was interaction between the people at these Korean sites and Jomon people in Kyushu. [page 91]

 (II) The Yayoi period (300 B.C.E. to 300 C.E.)2

The Yayoi period begins with the introduction of rice cultivation into the northern coast of Kyushu island by settlers from the southern coast of the Korean peninsula around the fourth century B.C.E The new settlers from Korea must have come in groups since the archeological sites show extensive and well organized cultivation which would require the collaboration of large groups of people. Rice cultivation brought not only farming skills and tools but also shaman rituals and burial customs as well as a new type of pottery production.

Rice cultivation was very favorable in Japan with its warmer climate, plentiful rainfall and fertile land. Rice cultivation spread to the eastern and northern parts of Japan within a couple of centuries. As to the original people, there has been no discovered evidence of mass conflicts with new comers in the form of massacre or genocide and the studies on the skeletons in jar coffins of the time show that eighty to ninety percent of them belong to the new settlers from Korea with taller statures and other distinguishing anatomical features.3 The latest study on the mitochondria of DNA of both modern Korean and Japanese also show similarity between eighty to ninety percent suggesting that the original people declined in numbers and eventually were absorbed by the new comers.

Typical early examples of Yayoi sites include:

1. tatske site in Fukuoka

Remains and archeological evidence has been discovered which includes irrigation ditches, pools and remains of rice paddies; wooden farm tools together with jar coffins which contained Korean bronze daggers and bronze spears, etc. Many pots with marks of rice grains on their bottoms have also been discovered. In addition, farmer’s footprints embedded in the clay bottoms of rice paddies have also been found. The reddish earthen wares are the oldest among the Yayoi earthenware and they are without any decorative marks or patterns, which are identical to those of the Kimhae area on the southern coast of Korea.

1. Kanenokuma site in Fukuoka

Researchers have found one hundred forty five jar coffins, twenty seven burial mounds, two cysts and sixty-two human skeletons which provided excellent material for forensic studies. In the Kasuka city near Fukuoka, more than fifty sites were excavated to find jar coffins, in addition bronze swords, bronze [page 92] spears, bronze bracelets as well as jade jewelry were found and these were all similar in design to those found in Korean sites of earlier period.

1. Sawari site in Fukuoka

The relics discovered here comprise earthenware and stone tools which were similar to the remains at the Songkukni site of Korea of Bronze age, fifth century B.C.E.

1. Yimori site in Fukuoka

More surprising findings were made here: Bronze mirrors and bronze swords and comma-shaped jades of Korean origin were found buried in a large wooden coffin of fourth century B.C.E The set of these three articles are considered the divine imperial regalia, symbolizing the authority of Japanese emperors even today.

1. Yoshitakagi site in Fukuoka

There are more than seven hundred Yayoi tombs of which thirty four contained wooden coffins. In one wooden coffin was found a bronze mirror, bronze daggers and bronze spears, etc. These bronze artifacts are associated with shaman rituals like all bronze artifacts in other sites.

1. Nabata site in Karatsu

Here are found not only rice paddies but also head bones of three pigs with holes that were used as offerings in Shaman rituals as one can see in Korea even today. Also found were all sorts of wooden and stone farming tools.

1. Yoshinogari site in Saga, Kyushu

This is one of the most famous Yayoi sites. It covers forty hectares, spanning the whole Yayoi period and more. Here are hundreds of pit dwelling sites, high watch towers, large raised houses surrounded by double moats and a large hill of tombs. The oldest stone molds for bronze spears in Japan were found here. There are also stone farming tools, bronze mirrors, bronze daggers, etc. Among more than two thousands jar coffins three hundreds skeleton were found well preserved for anatomical studies where it was learned that most of them are from the Korean peninsula.

1. Toro site near Tokyo

Discovered in 1943, the site held the remains of a village and adjacent rice fields, which comprised a network of waterways more than one thousand feet [page 93] long and arranged in consecutive rows of neat rectangular paddies with earthen banks. This site provided one of the best example of how Yayoi people cultivated rice.

In summary, the Yayoi culture may be characterized as follows:

(1) The earliest Yayoi type potteries are found at the northern part of Kyushu. They are similar to the Korea plain earthenware of the period in shape and materials.

(2) A ditch or moat surrounds five or more pit dwelling sites.

(3) Dolmen and jar coffins are the burial methods in its early period, where bronze mirrors, daggers, bells and jade ornaments used in shaman rituals are found.

(4) Bronze mirrors were imported from China and Korea and copies were made in Japan.

(5) From eighty to ninety percent of the skeletons of the Yayoi period belong to settlers from the Korean peninsula.

(6) Existence of about a hundred community states in Japan are mentioned in the Chinese chronicle of the Wei state, which records that Himiko or the supreme Shaman ruler sending diplomatic missions in 238 C.E. and the bestowment of a hundred bronze mirrors and other gifts. She also sent a mission to Silla four decades earlier according to the Samkugsagi or “Three Kingdom Chronicle” of Korea.

(III) Kofun period [300 C.E. to 600 C.E.]4

Kofun means old tomb with an earthen mound on top.

In Kyushu and along the coastal area of the Seto inland sea in Japan rice farming was introduced by early settlers. Tombs with big and small mounds were built from the fourth century C.E. until the seventh century. Especially noteworthy are the so-called keyhole shaped tomb mounds. These tombs had a peculiar shape in that the front part was square while the rear part was round. The meaning or source of this custom is not known for sure. Some suggest that perhaps the round rear part is where people were buried with various relics, while the square front was used for rituals. Several keyhole shaped tombs are also found in Korea, although their dates are not known. Since most of the remains in the early tombs are comprised of bronze mirrors, bronze bells, comma shaped jades or stone bracelets, which were associated with shaman rituals, it has been suggested that the occupants of, these tombs may have been chieftains of shaman tradition or shamans themselves.

In May 1998, thirty four bronze mirrors were excavated from the Kurozu- [page 94] ka tomb at Nara, causing national excitement in Japan since this suggested the powerfulness of the occupant, who might have been the ruler of the so-called Yamato court of early unified Japan. There are seven tombs which produced more than thirty replica mirrors and some suggested that this reflected the powerful status of occupants.

Dating to the fifth century, iron weapons, iron armor, iron helmets and other equestrian artifacts are found in the tombs of this period. The earliest iron foundry site in Japan dates from the sixth century and studies on the components of these iron artifacts suggest that they were made with imported iron ingots from Kaya or that the artifacts themselves were imported directly from the Kaya area. Kaya is the name of a series of kingdoms that thrived in the southern part of Korea along the lower basin of the Nakdong river during this same time period.

In a typical tomb at the Kurofuneyama site dating to the fifth century in the Kinki region were found twenty four sets of helmets and breast armors of iron plates with iron tacks along with iron swords and iron arrowheads.

In the fifth century a new type of pottery, called Sueki in Japanese, shows up in archeological sites and tombs in Japan together with improved iron farming tools. The Sueki pottery, which means iron in Korean, is the product of a new type of kiln with a climbing tunnel. In this type of a kiln a high temperature of 1300 degrees or more in Celsius can be reached to produce gray unglazed hard stoneware which proved more useful than the earthenware of the Yayoi period. Since kick wheels were used in manufacture, pottery making became very efficient and its use became widespread. The earliest Sueki stoneware in Japan is found similar to those from Haman area in Kaya. Sueki pottery making spread throughout Japan by the early sixth century even reaching the north eastern part of Japan. There are more than one thousand and five hundred villages bearing names associated with Sueki pottery throughout Japan.

At about the same time, improved iron farming tools reached Japan, making it possible to cultivate more farm land out of intractable wild areas by more people who came from Kaya, Silla and Paekche area in south Korea and settled in Japan.

The fifth century marks the second wave of massive settlement from Korea to Japan. As reflected in the archeological findings and records in Nihn-shoki, one of the oldest Japanese chronicles, this was the time many settlers from Korea came to Japan in great numbers. This was due to the unstable political situation in Korea. The Koguryo Kingdom was expanding southward and engaged in battles against Paekche for more than thirty years from the [page 95] middle of the fourth century. The rising Silla kingdom was putting pressure on Kaya and other people in the southern coast of Korea. These boat people from Korea of the fourth and fifth centuries opened up new rice fields out of wild alluvial plains like the Habikino area near Nara or the Kawachi area near Osaka with new and improved iron farming tools and new stoneware for cooking and storing food along with performing religious rituals.

In tombs, dated to the late fifth or sixth centuries, relics are now abundant in golden or silver artifacts including golden crowns, gilt bronze shoes, golden rings, golden earrings or gilt equestrian ornaments. It is interesting to note that in the tombs of Paekche, Silla, Koguryo or Kaya, these golden artifacts are similarly found from about the same period.

Out of four thousand or more keyhole shaped tombs in Japan thirty six are designated as the graves of Japanese emperors or royal family members as established in 1886. These tombs are forbidden to be studied. Tomb size peaked in the fifth century with the construction of key hole shaped tombs attributed to Ojin and his son Nintoku (1600 feet long). This latter is said to rival the Egyptian pyramids in volume and it is estimated that 6.8 million person-days of labor were needed to build it Curiously some of the relics of the Nintoku emperor’s tomb were washed out during a storm in the last century and turned out to be similar to those of Paekche king Muryung’s, which dates to the early sixth century CJE., while Nintoku’s tomb was claimed to be a century older.

The Fujinoki tomb and other tombs in Nara area also yielded many relics similar to those of King Muryung’s of Paekche, especially gilt bronze shoes with fish design, which is also found on a gilt bronze shoe from a Naju tomb of Korea. Among many other tombs that produced relics similar to those of Paekche’s, the Funayama tomb in Tamana, near Kumamoto, Kyushu is especially striking in that a golden crown and a pair of gilt bronze shoes of identical shape and design are found along with many other similar artifacts, in this tomb an iron sword was also found with an inscription to the effect that this sword was offered by the great king Kaero of Paekche to bless the keeper for his eternal prosperity and prosperous posterity. In addition, the existence of a Paekche style shrine for the gods of heaven and harvest on a hill at Kikuchi, near Kumamoto, Kyushu, convinces us of the strong affiliation of this area with a tamno or colonial territory of Paekche at about this period.

In this connection Japanese King Mu’s letter5 sent to the Lieu Sung state of China in 478 C.E. provides the most crucial clue to the connection of Paekche and the Wae court of Japan during this period. In part of the letter King Mu wrote that his father and brother died at the same time and this can [page 96] only be King Kaero of Paekche who were put to death by Koguryo army near Seoul in 475 C.E. In this letter the menace of Koguryo is mentioned as well as his determination to revenge the deaths. From this context Prof. J.C Soh6 suggested for the first time that king Mu must be king Muryung in youth when he was ruling in Japan since he was the only surviving son of Kaero. In the same letter King Mu wrote about how his ancestor Nyeh conquered Japan. Beginning from 421 C.E. there were five Kings of Japan who sent letters to Chinese courts. So if we accept the above argument, the ancestor Nyeh of King Mu must have conquered Japan around the turn of fifth century. This makes sense since the archeological analyses of Kofun remains eloquently bespeak the intimate connection between Paekche and the Wae court of Japan during this period.

There are additional evidences of this connection found in the inscription on two iron swords, one of which was found in the Funayama tumulus in Kyushu and the other in the Inariyama tumulus in Honshu.

The Funayama sword, according to R. Ryu7, bears an inscription to the effect that this sword was made by an official named Muri by order of the great King Kaero who rules the world. The bearer of this sword will be blessed forever with prosperity and longevity, etc.

Actually only the last character of Kaero is legible, but this character is used only to denote the names of Paekche persons in the historical records of Japan, and the name Kaero is the only possible one in this context.

The other sword, from Inariyama, bears the date of 471 and carries an inscription of King Kaero. It states that Oh Wakeh has ancestor so-and-so who served as the head of the guard corps for the great King Kaero for generations and assisted him to rule his kingdom. This sword was made to record the history of his service.

According to Murayarna and Miller8, the word “Wakeh” is widely used to mean lord by Altaic speaking people and in this case it refers to the princes of the royal family of Paekche who were appointed to rule the feudal lands of Paekche. This implies that the great King Kaero was the overlord for the Wakeh or feudal lord of the lands where the swords were found.

It should be added that the earliest keyhole shaped tomb is located at Karatsu, Kyushu, indicating the spread of the keyhole shaped tombs from Kyushu to the rest of the country.

One last piece of surprise linking Paekche and the Wae court is revealed by the archeological discovery of the remains of a funeral shrine in Kongju, Korea of King Muryung’s laying-in-state before his formal burial.

Similar shrine remains were also found near Nara, Japan, which matches [page 97] the description of Nihonshoki about an emperor named Jomei being enshrined at a Kudara (or Paekche) shrine for laying-in-state in the north of Kudara Palace in 642 before the formal burial as described in Nihonshoki.

In summary it may be said that the relics of the early keyhole shaped tombs reflect the Kaya influence with shaman related items in the bronze and iron wares as well as Sueki stoneware, while the later tombs suggest predominant Paekche’s cultural influence and Paekche’s direct rule in limited areas such as Kumamoto or Asuka area.

(IV) Asuka period(600 C.E. to 710 C.E.)9

This period saw the rise of Buddhist culture which was introduced by Paekche in 552 C.E. In 660 C.E. Paekche fell and in 668 C.E. Koguryo fell to the united armies of Tang China and Silla. This sent the third wave of emigrating people from Korea to Japan, bringing not only officials, learned scholars but also skilled people, contributing to the advancement of the culture of Japan to a higher level.

In 552 King Seong of Paekche sent a Buddhist missionary to Japan, where Buddhism was adopted as the state religion and Japan saw a phenomenal rise in Buddhist culture. Paekche had been sending regular missions of Confucian scholars and other artisans since 523. All these people added in laying the groundwork for the ensuing cultural development of Japan.

The first Buddhist image sent by the King Seong is still kept at a temple in Nagano, while the first Buddhist temple in Japan was built in Asuka in 596 C.E. The central Buddha statue in this temple is sixteen feet tall and still stands and is venerated even today. The old and famous temples such as Sitenohji temple in Osaka, Horyuji temple in Nara and other temples were built one after another. In fact by 624 C.E. the number of temples reached forty six and numerous monks and nuns were exchanged between Paekche and Wae Japan. High priests came from the three kingdoms to Wae Japan. In building a temple many skilled artisans are needed for tile making, carpentry and sculpture work in both wood and metal; for pagoda building and painting etc. Today we marvel at the wondrous works of art of this period in temple architecture, sculptural work, paintings and other genre. Since almost all the temples of Paekche from this period were destroyed it is a great legacy for Koreans to appreciate the artistic accomplishments of the Paekche people.

In 663, Wae Japan sent an army to support the surviving army of Paekche only to be defeated by the united army of China and Silla. At this time the victorious Tang set up commandaries in the former Paekche and Koguryo king- [page 98] doms including one in Kyushu as well as one in Kyungju with the Silla king as its commander This upset Silla, which waged war against Tang China after the fall of Koguryo in 668. It took several years of hard warfare by Silla before they were finally victorious and made China withdraw all of her commandaries.

In 670 the Wae court of Japan adopted its new name—Japan, which means a land of rising sun. This is known to have derived from the original meaning of “land of sun” for Kaya10 in Korea. A couple of years later in 672 a coup d’etat placed a pro-Silla court in power in Japan, ensuring amicable relation with the victorious Silla, which sent twenty three diplomatic missions to Japan in a matter of thirty years.

It is most interesting to observe how Silla exerted its influence toward Japan in many ways. For example the Avatamska sutra, popular in Silla, gained popularity in Japan also, leading eventually to the constitution of the largest temple at the time, Todaiji in Nara in 752 C.E., the dedication of which was attended by ten thousand monks in Japan as well as 700 guests from Silla.

At this time all the teachings and readings of Buddhism were said to have been conducted in Korean according to studies by scholars.11 This is plausible since even the famous anthology of ancient poems, Manyoshu, which was written in the mid-eight century, can be properly understood by reading through old Korean.

CONCLUSION

We have outlined the close cultural and historical relation between Korea and Japan spanning a thousand years through the archeological and documentary evidence of the Yayoi, Kofun and Asuka periods. There was a one-way flow of people and culture from Korea to Japan in general. Practically Japan was the extension of Korean culture and people until the fall of Paekche and Koguryo in 660 and 668 respectively.

Mounting archeological and documentary evidence lead to this general observation. Of course there are aspect of culture that evolved in different ways sometimes. But the intimate relation between the two people in ancient times can not be denied and the recognition of it in a proper and correct manner would be advantageous to forming proper and tenable relations between them in the future.

We may add finally that the archaeological findings of Japan’s origin suggest also that Korea’s origin may be traced in similar manner, such that [page 99] rice farming people from the east coast of china came to settle in accommodation with earlier natives while nomadic people from the north arrived later to rule, etc.

NOTES

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