

Local Legends of the Genpei War: Reflections of Mediaeval Japanese History

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Historians have characterized the twelfth century in Japan as a period of significant change, marked by political and military disturbances, shrinkage of the landholdings and economic base of the ruling aristocracy, the emergence of new styles and genres in art and literature, and, symbolic of all the other changes and conflicts of the period, the Genpei War of 1180–1185, a civil war between adherents of two warrior families. The winning side, the Minamoto, established itself as the de facto political authority in the country and consolidated landholdings and civil power at the expense of the upper aristocracy, while the losing side, the Taira, were effectively destroyed as an independent political force.

The Genpei War provided the subject matter for much of mediaeval history and literature, which offer innumerable accounts of the lives of the nobles, priests, warriors and ladies who figured in the conflict. Mediaeval written sources are consistent in ignoring the commoners who were contemporary with these same warriors and nobles, but the commoners themselves could hardly be untouched by such momentous events, and they had their own versions to recount. An extensive body of local legends about the Genpei War arose in rural areas throughout Japan. These legends have persisted, or continued to be invented, into the present century, and they provide interesting evidence for the existence of a large audience with interests different from those expressed in written historical and fictional works treating the same period and the same characters. A survey of collections of legend texts indicates that legends related to the Genpei War are far more numerous than one would normally expect legends connected with a single general subject to be, and their popularity is further demonstrated by a wide geographic distribution. This article will first outline Genpei legends as a type and

then will focus on a specific kind of Genpei legend, the *Heike tani* 平家谷 or *kakurezato* 隠里 [“Heike valley” or “hidden village”] legends, variants of which comprise one of the two largest categories of the legends analyzed here. In conclusion the article will suggest reasons for the wide distribution and continued popularity of Genpei legends in general and of the *Heike tani* legends in particular.

The period which gave rise to these legends saw many changes, but none was more striking than the growth of the warrior class as a politically effective group. At the beginning of the twelfth century rulers and other members of the higher aristocracy were able to utilize warriors as border guards in the provinces or as police in the capital. The leaders of these warrior clans were also members of the aristocracy, but they were of the lower aristocracy, decidedly inferior in social status to the court nobles who lived in the capital and monopolized the bureaucratic positions in the government. By the 1170s two warrior families, the Minamoto (also called the Genji 源氏人) and the Taira (also called the Heike 平家 or Heishi 平氏), had emerged as the most powerful of the warrior clans. The Genji were based in the eastern provinces of Honshu, and the Heike landholdings were concentrated in western Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku. Rivalry between the two families and their retainers erupted into a full scale civil war in 1180. After two years of fighting, the Heike, who had earlier managed to marry into the imperial family, fled to the west from Kyoto, taking with them the child emperor Antoku 安徳. The Genji defeated the Heike decisively in a sea battle near Dannoura 壇ノ浦, in the Shimonoseki Straits between Honshu and Kyushu, in 1185. The Emperor Antoku was drowned, and those of the Heike leaders who had not died in battle or killed themselves were captured and executed or forced to become monks. Many women had accompanied the Heike forces in their exodus from Kyoto; those who were not drowned presumably were allowed to return to the capital to live quietly.

The events of the war quickly became translated into literature. Within thirty-five years of the Heike defeat Shinano no Zenji Yukinaga 信濃前司行長 had written the earliest version of what was to become the greatest work of mediaeval Japanese literature, the *Heike monogatari* 平家物語 [“The tale of the Heike”].¹ This story of the Heike’s rise to power and their inevitable destruction was a favorite source also of oral recitations given by wandering blind priests, *biwa hōshi* 琵琶法師 (so called because they accompanied their chanting on a type of lute, *biwa*).

1. Kenneth Dean Butler, “The Textual Evolution of the *Heike Monogatari*,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 26 (1966), p. 23.

There is a complex relationship, not yet well understood, between written texts used as prompt books for teaching, or even texts which were memorized entire, and the actual performances by these priests. Barbara Ruch proposes the term "vocal literature" to describe the medieval performance tradition based on written texts, as opposed to oral literature, which uses no written texts, and literature proper, in which text not performance is central.² *Biwa hōshi* or their prototypes had been performing in this vocal literature tradition since the tenth century, but in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there was a significant increase in the number of itinerant storytellers, both *biwa hōshi* and *etoki* 絵解 ["picture explainers"], who used illustrations to enrich their performances.³ Such performers travelled throughout the country, telling the stories in their repertoires to audiences of all kinds—literate and illiterate, aristocratic and plebeian.

Thus episodes from the *Heike monogatari* and other literary works dealing with the same subject were disseminated nationally and made available even to those who were illiterate, and this dissemination continued for centuries. We might therefore expect to find among local legends about the Genpei War some which are demonstrably literary in origin. Although the growth of vocal literature in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries could easily have provided a connection between literary sources and local historical legend traditions, none of the legends in this sample is immediately derived from literary sources. The most obvious possible source, *Heike monogatari*, ends with the defeat of the Heike, and a large proportion of these local legends concern the lives of the Heike subsequent to their defeat or directly contradict literary versions of events. The assumption of the narrative *Heike monogatari* is that the Heike were in fact defeated and effectively destroyed at Dannoura, and that is the assumption also of later literary works, including plays in the *nō* and *kabuki* repertoires which concern the Genpei War; while the assumption of many of these Genpei legends is that the Heike survived their defeat and hid. The literary and legendary traditions do not overlap; the concerns of one are not the concerns of the other, and the role of the *biwa hōshi* or *etoki* in spreading these local Genpei legends would seem therefore to have been minimal. Nevertheless, itinerant performers may have been instrumental in spreading knowledge of themes and characters, a sort of historical consciousness,

2. Barbara Ruch, "Medieval Jongleurs and the Making of a National Literature," in *Japan in the Muromachi Age*, ed. John Whitney Hall and Toyoda Takeshi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 286.

3. Ruch, p. 293.

amongst rural people who were otherwise removed from a detailed or coherent view of the war.

This article analyzes several legends dealing with the Heike and/or the Genji and their connections with specific locales. The legends are preserved in local gazetteers and legend collections dating from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Examining available collections yielded a sample of 83 Genpei legends from all the major islands of Japan excluding Hokkaido, but including Okinawa. These legends resolve into three types, based on their subjects: 1) those in which the subject is the Genji and their connection with a particular locale or landmark; 2) those in which the subject is the Heike and their connection to a locale or landmark; and 3) those in which a neutral person's encounter with the Genji or Heike is the subject. The third type is rare. One example is the story of a blind minstrel who rests in an abandoned temple one night. The ghosts of the Heike appear and ask him to chant the story of one of their battles.⁴ This particular version of the legend was told by a blind woman who was trained as a professional storyteller, but literary versions are common. One of the most familiar is Lafcadio Hearn's retelling, "Earless Hoichi," in his book *Kwaidan*.⁵

The first type, the Genji legends, were all collected from areas whose proprietors were, in the twelfth century, largely sympathetic to the Genji. The second type, the legends in which the Heike are central, were all collected from areas which at the time of the Genpei War were either sympathetic to the Heike or were common routes of march for Heike armies. One source speculates that Heike warriors, who were defeated more than once in campaigns in central Honshu, may have deserted and hidden in the mountains in that area early in the war.⁶ This correlation of Heike legends with provenances associated with the Taira and Genji legends with Minamoto provenances is a demonstration of the close connection of both types of legends with at least one level of historical "reality." The occurrence of both kinds of legends in relatively restricted geographic areas suggests that these legends do indeed reflect, no matter how murkily, local concerns. But they reflect local concerns in terms which have a wider historical significance, terms and characters derived from the Genpei War.

Both Heike and Genji legends are similar in extending to many

4. Iwase Hiroshi 岩瀬博, *Goze no kataru mukashibanashi* 昔女の語る昔話 (Tokyo: Obundo, 1975), pp. 81p85.

5. Lafcadio Hearn, *Kwaidan* (New York: Dover, 1968) pp. 3p12.

6. *Minwa densetsu no tabi* 民話伝説の旅 ed. Chubu Nihon Shinbunsha 中部日本新聞社 (Tokyo: Jinbutsu Oraisha, 1963), p. 192.

areas of culture whether their central features are related to the Taira/Heike or the Minamoto/Genji. Ancient tumuli are explained as caches of weapons hidden by the Heike after their defeat in order to disguise their identity as warriors from their victorious enemies,⁷ or a mysterious grave may be identified as the burial place of a famous Genji warrior.⁸ Other legends explain the mysterious backgrounds of particular families in a village or the otherwise inexplicable elegance of the women of a remote area by crediting them with descent from the Heike;⁹ still others supply geographical etiologies or even routes of march for an army, all linked to the Genpei War.¹⁰ The Kantō area, which was the headquarters for the Minamoto leader Yoritomo 頼朝, provides several variants of the story of the servant who carried the skull of his master Minamoto no Yorimasa 源頼政 about his neck until it grew heavy as a stone, then stopped and buried it at that very place.¹¹ Legends with a parallel structure but different characters, in this case the priest Shunkan 俊寛, exiled for plotting the overthrow of the Taira while they were still in power, and his faithful servant, occur in several places in Kyushu, which was the nearest main island to Kikaigashima 鬼界が嶋, Shunkan's place of exile.¹² All these legends, whatever their structure or subject, indicate an underlying willingness, even eagerness, amongst rural populations to record or manufacture a local association with the complex of historical events which comprised the Genpei War. Whether or not any of these local legends reflect historical "truth" has been impossible to prove. Such proof would be interesting indeed, but surely the questions of the beliefs and motivations of the people who have told the legends are more accessible to analysis and just as important.

Both the Heike legends and the Genji legends can be roughly subdivided into two categories. One is that of legends which describe activities or events in the lives of human characters. The other category consists of explanations of how particular inanimate objects or places received their names or their physical attributes. This latter category crosscuts both Heike and Genji legends so that examples from one type would be interchangeable with examples from the second; only the

7. Both Kobayashi Tomoo 小林友雄, *Shimotsuke densetsushu* 下野伝説集 (Tokyo: Eisho Shahan, 1942), p. 263, and Matsunaga Goichi 松永伍一, *Heike densetsu* 平家伝説 (Tokyo: Chuokoronsha, 1973), p. 69, give variants of such stories.

8. Fujisawa Eihiko 藤沢衛彦, *Nihon densetsu sosho* 日本伝説叢書 (Tokyo: Nihon Densetsu Sosho Kankokai, 1918), X, 311.

9. Fujisawa, II, 225, and Kobayashi, p. 262.

10. Fujisawa, VIII, 108.

11. Fujisawa, VI, pp. 121, 234, and 236.

12. Matsunaga, p. 141.

names "Heike" and "Genji" are different. For instance, there are several examples among legends of both types about rocks or hills called "Banner-raising Hill." The name is said to have been given in every case because a general, either Genji or Heike, depending on the provenance of the legend, raised his standard there before a battle. Most of the Genji legends in this sample belong to this category of etiological legends.

Almost half the Heike legends in the sample are variants of another sort of narrative, examples of which are so numerous that Japanese scholars have given them a generic name, *Heike tani* or *kakurezato* legends.¹³ Standard elements of these legends include the idea that many Heike actually survived the decisive battle at Dannoura and were able to flee with their families into the mountains. There they established villages in which they and their descendants lived secretly, keeping entirely to themselves for years and in some cases centuries, and preserving their customs and their language unchanged. Legends with this basic structure are common throughout Japan, and are usually told by or about inhabitants of remote areas such as the mountainous regions of central Kyushu or Honshu. Such stories are so common that one scholar has devoted an entire book to a collection of legends about what happened to the Heike after Dannoura.¹⁴

Some of these *kakurezato* legends serve to explain why one village is different from another. Early reports of such legends from eighteenth century gazetteers and travel journals show that the narrators were often quite specific about the habits of strangers reputed to be Heike. One states that people in a nearby but physically inaccessible village in modern Nagano Prefecture were descendants of the Heike, that they wore no clothes at all in the summer, but in the winter wore a sort of coat made of woven grass and called *bata*.¹⁵ Another account describes Heike villages in Kyushu: the men all had two swords (indicative of their samurai descent, ordinary farmers would not have had such weapons) and had lost all knowledge of salt when they were finally discovered.¹⁶ Yet another states that a Heike village, again in Nagano Prefecture, went undetected for 450 years, until one day a lacquer bowl floated downstream to a normal village, whose inhabitants then investigated and dis-

13. *Nihon densetsu meii* 日本伝説名彙, ed. Yanagita Kunio 柳田国男, 3rd ed. (Tokyo: Nihon Hoso Kyokai, 1971), p. 407.

14. Nagai Hikokuma 永井彦熊, *Rakujitsugo no Heike* 落日後の平家 (Tokyo: Yuzankaku, 1965).

15. Fujisawa, III, 144.

16. *Kobunko* 広文庫, ed. Mozume Takami 物集高見 (Tokyo: *Kobunkokai*, 1916), XIII, 904.

covered the descendants of the Heike dwelling deep in the mountains.¹⁷

An Okinawan tradition maintains that Heike survivors fled to the Ryukyus and established a dynasty there. The tradition is supported by the fact that a Ryukyuan dynasty was established in the thirteenth century and that Okinawa entered into a tributary relationship with the Ming dynasty in 1372, as well as by the common occurrence of the Chinese character for "Taira" in Ryukyuan surnames and place names.¹⁸ The Heike were historically involved with commerce on the Inland Sea of Japan as early as the late eleventh century; this too lends credence to the hypothesis that survivors might have escaped to Okinawa after the war.

It is significant that in none of the *Heike tani/kakurezato* legends in this sample do the narrators themselves claim to be Heike descendants, but the subjects of these stories are, at the times the legends speak of (usually an indeterminate, ahistorical time), farmers or peasants whose ancestors were Heike or retainers of the Heike. There is one exception: as recently as 1961, inhabitants of the village of Miyako, on the island of Shikoku, considered themselves descendants of a Heike retainer who saved the Emperor Antoku from drowning and fled with him to Shikoku. The narrators of this legend were also the subjects of the story, and their situation clearly implies their belief in what they told.¹⁹ There are several Shikoku versions of the legend that Antoku did not drown, that a retainer fled with him and finally settled in seclusion. One such variant "ends . . . and people there still call their sons . . . *onoko*, as in the old texts."²⁰ Here the narrator is using historical/linguistic data to support the authenticity of his story, but he is not himself a member of the group which is the subject of the story. As in all the *kakurezato* legends in this sample except the Miyako variant previously mentioned, a lack of performance context makes it difficult to be more specific about the narrators, their points of view, or the elements of belief involved in the narration.

The most obvious explanation of the wide distribution of *Heike tani/kakurezato* legends, and of Genpei legends in general, lies in the historical events to which they are all linked in some degree. The Genpei War was the first armed conflict of truly national scope in Japanese history. The armies involved moved back and forth across Honshu and fought on

17. Ibid.

18. Shunzo Sakamaki, "The Heike: From Defeat at Dannoura to a Golden Age in Ryukyu?" *Journal of Asian Studies* 27 (Nov. 1967), p. 119.

19. Francis L. K. Hsu, *Iemoto: The Heart of Japan*, (New York: Halstead Press, 1975), p. 53.

20. Fujisawa, II, 226.

Shikoku, Kyushu, and at sea for five years. The end of the war meant destruction for the Heike and unprecedented military and political supremacy for the Minamoto. Social customs and economic organization began to change as a result of the war; the whole country was affected, and affected at all levels of society. It is not surprising therefore that one of the effects of the war should have been the widespread reflection in legends of local versions of events related to the national conflict.

There are other reasons that might help account for the relative popularity of the *Heike tani/kakurezato* legends. Yanagita Kunio has suggested that this type of story belongs to an extensive Japanese tradition of "hidden village" legends. He includes in this tradition stories of visits by mortals to the dragon king's palace in the ocean, beliefs in underground hoards of treasure, an underworld kingdom of mice which is entered through caves in this world, and mountain villages with strange inhabitants who appear in neighboring villages only to buy supplies, then vanish back into the hills.²¹ The parallels Yanagita draws between these other "hidden village" legends and such Heike legends as those from Shikoku about the Heike retainer saving the Emperor Antoku are not convincing, however. The only element his examples have in common is the idea of a hidden or secret community. Attitudes and access to such communities and the use of magical or historical elements in the narratives Yanagita mentions vary widely.

Bronislaw Malinowski's idea that myth may serve as a charter is more useful as a tool for understanding the possible functions of these *Heike tani* legends. Malinowski originally used this concept in describing the landholding systems of the Trobriand Islanders: Each person subscribed to a myth about a particular hole or set of holes in the ground from which an ancestor had issued. The locations of these holes, validated by the myth, marked the site of an individual's property.²² Applying this function of myth to the *Heike tani* legends, we see that they might easily have served to help incorporate commoners into the ranks of the warrior aristocracy, symbolically if not literally. The terms of the legends—aristocrats fleeing into the mountains and remaining secluded, or fearing to disclose their true identity for fear of reprisal by their victorious foes, who of course remained in the urban centers of

21. Yanagita Kunio, *Santo mindan shu* 山島民譚集, Vol. 137 of *Toyo bunko* 東洋文庫 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1969), pp. 326-328.

22. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, Vol. 1, "Soil-Tilling and Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Islands," (1935; rpt. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), p. 341.

power—would have worked well as explanations of a higher than expected social status for their “descendants.” Only one legend in the sample is explicit about this kind of commoner-aristocrat relationship. During the seventeenth century one Hirabayashi Baien, from a remote mountain village in modern Nagano Prefecture, became disciple and then successor to an eminent Confucian scholar. This caused some surprise among Baien’s scholarly peers, but when the facts became known, that Baien’s village was actually a Heike village, and he therefore of aristocratic descent, the anomaly was explained.²³ Nor have more highly placed families always been immune to the desire to ally themselves to the Taira; some even appear to have forged documents and constructed spurious literary works to establish their claims to kinship.²⁴

Heike tani legends may also have functioned, if not as charters, then as a more tenuous but still desirable link between the peasant narrators and the aristocratic subjects of the legends. Francis Hsu suggests this possibility in connection with the Shikoku villagers who believed they were descendants of a Heike retainer.²⁵ Others have suggested the corollary possibility that in the turbulent period during and after the Genpei War many displaced persons fled into the mountains from the cities and that these people, some of whom may actually have been retainers or servants of the Heike, used such legends to establish themselves in remote areas and communities which would be safe from interference by earlier residents.²⁶

The existence of this body of legends about the Genpei War is evidence for the abiding interest of rural non-aristocratic populations in historical events of national concern, while the legends themselves demonstrate that the nature of this interest differs significantly from that expressed in the written history and literature which was largely a product of the upper classes. These local legends generally serve to link particular locales and/or their residents with wider areas of interest, both social and geographic. In many cases these local legends give character to the landscape in question; landmarks are named in terms that are explained as results of some Genpei War-connected activity. In other cases the link is genealogical not geographical, and individuals or even village groups are explained or described as survivors or descendants of the defeated Heike aristocrats.

Although recent collections of legends exist, there are also rich and

23. Fujisawa, III, 269.

24. Matsunaga, p. 81.

25. Hsu, p. 54.

26. Matsunaga, p. 54.

almost untapped sources available in folk song, travel diaries, and gazetteers, especially those written during the Tokugawa period. At one end of the spectrum, for example, is Matsuo Bashō's 松尾芭蕉 highly polished literary product of 1688, *Oku no hosonaghi michi* 奥の細道, which abounds in references to local legends about the Genpei War and its participants. Less consciously artistic travellers emphasized the legends themselves rather than using them to create an atmosphere as did Bashō. Careful readings of such works would conceivably yield important insights into these local legends, the people who told them, and the circumstances which produced them. Twelfth century aristocrats kept diaries and wrote histories, and we look in these for the "facts" about the Genpei War and its aftermath. Later authors created works of literature to illustrate these historical events in more artistic and entertaining ways. Commoners of the twelfth and subsequent centuries told stories about their homes or their families and neighbors and their connections with the war; these Genpei legends are another reflection of history.