

## POPULATION GROWTH ISSUES: CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF ABORTION IN JAPAN

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### Summary

Two different types (differing according to epoch and mentality) of *mizuko-kuyo* can be identified in Japanese history. The pre-modern type was represented by of the Kansei Reforms (1721–1846) and the modern type was widespread between 1980 and 1985. The mentality of the pre-modern type can be characterized as a moral precept of a society that considered neonaticide and abortion (*mabiki*) to be immoral and heartless, and that held that deceased embryos had a kind of eternal spirit that needed to be healed and purified. The mentality of the modern type of *mizuko-kuyo* is typified by the feeling of relief experienced by women who have had an abortion. *Mizuko-kuyo* services are held with increasing frequency in Japan today because of the increased number of abortions performed on young unmarried women. Because aborted fetuses and stillborn infants are not provided with graves of their own, many temples have established a monument to them in a corner of temple precincts. *Mizuko-kuyo* has changed in character. It is now a type of subculture accompanied by a modern system of abortion.

### 1. Two Different Types of *Mizuko-kuyo*

*Mizuko-kuyo*, a memorial service dedicated to Jizo, a Buddhist statue, aims to bring solace to the souls of infants who were stillborn or suffered abortion, miscarriage, or some other accident that prevented their birth. *Mizuko* means “water child” and *kuyo* means “service.” The same words can be pronounced in two different ways: *mizuko* when read in Japanese and *suizi* when pronounced phonetically. The word *suizi* was used as a posthumous Buddhist name in cases of miscarriage or the stillborn. In ancient documents of Japanese Buddhist temples the letters pronounced *mizuko* are not found. In folklore, the word *mizuko* has been used to suggest a fetus or embryo floating on a river.

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Since the Kamakura period (1185–1333), Jizo has been regarded as the savior of children by rescuing their tormented souls at the banks of the River Sai in the realm of the dead. Jizo is now the most popular Buddhist statue in Japan. Stone statues of Jizo are in every village throughout Japan. When referring to the Jizo statues, people use an honorific title such as *Ojizosan* (my dear Jizo) or *Ojizosama* (Mr. Jizo). Usually these Jizo statues are life-sized and they are always smiling. However, modern forms of *mizuko-kuyo* memorial services do not use such popular statues of Jizo. Temples undertaking the services have very highly regarded and respected statues, for instance ancient statues, works by renowned sculptors, or statues closely connected with famous old saints. Nowadays having a precious statue is important in order for a temple to attract clients for *mizuko-kuyo*. Sometimes, if a temple has a very precious Jizo statue, a long tradition of the pre-modern form of *mizuko-kuyo* has been continued at that temple. For example, in Eko-in temple, at an old cemetery in Tokyo, there is a stone monument of *mizuko-kuyo* that was erected in 1793 by Matsudaira Sadanobu (1758–1829). One of the most famous statesmen in Japan, Matsudaira Sadanobu was a senior counselor of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1867), best known as the initiator of the Kansei Reforms.

## 2. The Tokugawa Shogunate Banned *Mabiki*

One of the important objectives of the Kansei Reforms was to remove the traditional forms of neonaticide generally called *mabiki*. The word *mabiki* originally meant “thinning” and was used in reference to forestry and cultivation. Books to teach people that *mabiki* (neonaticide) was forbidden and heartless were published and spread by Buddhist monks and rural reformers. Three local magistrates (Daikan Kansen Okada, Naohiro Takegaki, and Takamoto Teranisi) ordered registration documents to be completed for pregnant women (*kaininsyozyocho*) to prevent abortion and *mabiki*. They also implemented a system to give money for the birth and living expenses of children. Several other local magistrates followed this lead. The stone monument of *mizuko-kuyo* in the Eko-in temple was built by Matsudaira Sadanobu to teach the Japanese people that even neonates had dignity and the right to be taken care of, and that *mizuko* should be cherished.

Another type of anti-neonaticide campaign was to dedicate a picture, usually of a horse, to a shrine or temple. The ancient rite of dedicating a living horse was transformed to the dedication of a picture of a horse painted on a wooden board with an ornamented frame. Dedicated to a shrine or a temple, this picture was called an *ema*—the *e* being for the picture and the *ma* signifying the horse. Even when the painted object was not a horse, the pictures were called *ema* because they were dedicated to a shrine or a temple, and this name lives on today. A famous *ema* preserved in the Tokuzouzi temple in

Ibaraki prefecture shows a woman putting a hand on the mouth of a neonate to kill it. The child's spirit is flying to the lotus pedestal on which a Jizo-like baby statue is standing. On the paper sliding doors behind the woman is her shadow but the silhouette is shaped as a demon. This *ema* suggests that the dead baby will be going to a higher world, and will stand by Jizo. These kinds of *ema* are called *mabiki-ema* and are found especially in eastern Japan.

### 3. Japanese Demography 1721–1846

The most astonishing fact of Japanese demography is that the total population from 1721 to 1846 was almost constant. In 1721 the population of Japan was 26.05 million, and in 1846 it was 26.84 million, according to Tokugawa Shogunate research. Overall, this is an increase of 3.2% in 125 years, which is, on average, a rise of 0.03% every year. Figures from 1600 to 1721 show that the Japanese population increased 0.65% every year. In the past, high school textbooks of Japanese history noted that the low birth rate in the Tokugawa Shogunate from 1721 to 1846 could be explained by the widespread practice of neonaticide. However, this theory is subject to conjecture as the low birth rate may have been attributable to three factors that have been recently uncovered by technological advances in historical demography:

- The Korean population fluctuation in the same periods showed similar patterns to the Japanese, which suggests the influence of natural disasters.
- In the western (relatively south) part of Japan, the population increased 20% from 1721 to 1846. In eastern (relatively north) part of Japan, the population decreased.
- There were several natural disasters during the period in question: for example, in 1732 there was a plague of leafhoppers in the western part of Japan; from 1753 to 1763 there was crop damage from cold weather, especially in summer; and similarly from 1833 to 1836 rice, originally a plant from the south, was susceptible to cold summers.

Hence, neonaticide (*mabiki*) was perhaps not the main cause of the abnormally low rate of population increase of 0.03% from 1721 to 1846. If natural disasters were the dominant cause of the abnormally low rate of population increase, was the frequency of neonaticide correspondingly less? In the years of famine, the frequency of neonaticide increased because parents who felt unable to keep a newborn baby were apt to commit neonaticide. The motivating mentality was the piteous feeling that the baby was destined to starve and that to kill it before it felt more pain was a kind of mercy.

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## Biographical Sketch

**Hisatake Kato** is the president of the Tottori University of Environmental Studies. He studied philosophy at Tokyo University. From 1969 to 2001, Professor Kato taught philosophy and ethics at Yamagata University, Tohoku University, Chiba University, and Kyoto University. He is the author of more than 20 books on philosophy and ethics in Japanese, including *The Genesis and Principle of Hegel's Philosophy* (1980), *An Introduction to Bioethics* (1986), *Philosophy of Jokes* (1987), *Philosophy of Forms* (1991), *An Introduction to Environmental Ethics* (1991), *Mission of Philosophy* (1992), *Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1993), *Ethics of the Twenty-First Century* (1993), *Technology and Ethics* (1996), *Brain Death, Clones, and Gene Therapy* (1999), *Ethics of Parenting* (2000), and *View of Value and Science/Technology* (2001). Professor Kato has been the chair of the Philosophical Association of Japan since 1999, a member of the steering committee of the Japan Association for Bioethics Studies since and also of the steering committee of the International Study Center of Japanese Culture. He serves on various government councils including the Council for Science and Technology and the Health Science Council. Professor Kato won the Yamazaki Prize for Philosophy in 1979 and the Watsuji Tetsuro Prize for Culture in 1994. He was awarded the Japanese Medal with Purple Ribbon in 2000 for his contribution to philosophy and ethics.