

Family status among the “Seven Village Headman” of Kishiwada Fief and feudal governance

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This article examines the issue of family social mobility among privileged village level administrators in late premodern Japan, taking up the case of the Kaname 要 Family, one of the “Seven Village Headmen” (*Shichinin Shoya* 七人庄屋) of Kishiwada 岸和田 Fief (Izumi Province), who played the role of ombudsmen between the Fief’s central administration and the peasantry, and the Fief’s pertaining to purchasing family prestige (*kenkin shoyo* 献金称誉). The research to date on the subject of social mobility among the late premodern peasantry in Japan has focused on the upward mobility of family status on a kinship group basis among the upper strata of village administrators and peasants with nominal samurai status (*goshi* 郷士), attempting to clarify antagonistic relationships that existed among various kinship groups and social strata. In contrast, the present study draws attention to family status upward mobility involving each individual kinship group, in order to show that rapid rises in family status by means of contributing money to the powers that be became an important factor in increasing friction and animosity within each group or social strata, represented here by the collection of families comprising the elite Seven Family Headmen.

The author’s intent is to highlight intragroup conflict from the aspect of the harmful effects of the *kenkin shoyo* system by examining the problems surrounding the sudden rise in the status of individual families. In more concrete terms, the author describes how beginning in Bunsei 3 (1820), when the practice of achieving upward family status mobility through monetary contributions was recognized by Kishiwada Fief, Seven Village Headman Kaname Gendayu 源太夫 went about securing a higher social status (i.e., elevated position in the Fief’s social hierarchy) for his family and relates how easily money facilitated that process.

As a result, it becomes clear first that for the Seven Village Headman, paying the required compensation did not instantly ensure the receipt of the corresponding status, nor did the practice guarantee unlimited upward mobility. The issue at hand in Gendayu's campaign is whether or not the sudden rise in his nuclear family's status was an attempt to attain social superiority over the other Seven Village Headman families. Furthermore, besides the ramifications of the Fief exchanging higher status for cash payoffs, the author suggests that the mere fact of a sudden change in family status or higher place in seating arrangements among the Kishiwada entourage, by any means, must have given rise to tension and turmoil within the Seven Village Headman. Given the fact that seating arrangements were determined by heredity, a sudden change in them through outright purchase could not have but fomented opposition from Gendayu's fellow Headmen. There is a distinct possibility that the advent of jealousy and anger caused by sudden rises in family status was a major factor in the divisions and rifts that in fact did occur in the relations within the group. Due to the fact that several of the Headmen were central figures in the Kishiwada Clan's local governance of its territory, dissatisfaction concerning Gendayu's achievement was also probably related to the dereliction and inefficiency that characterized their duties in its wake.

The author thus opens the possibility that rapid rises in family status through monetary contributions had damaging effects on local governance, in particular among mid and small scale fiefs, where economic inequality within kinship groups and social strata and the inequality in social status that it enabled fomented friction and animosity within each group or strata, which in turn had damaging effects on feudal administration.