
Lamp Oil and the Transformation of Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century Japan

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Abstract

During the Edo period, oil was a vital source of lamp fuel. Rapeseed and cottonseed were the main raw materials used to produce oil. Both were important commodities, the production and sale of which supported the reproduction of peasant households. Accordingly, oil was a vital everyday commodity, supporting the lives of many early modern Japanese.

What happened, then, when oil production and distribution began to penetrate rural Japan? How did the industry's expansion into Japan's hinterlands affect the social structure of rural communities? The theme of oil production and distribution was examined in the 1960s and 1970s. In much of that research, however, scholars characterized the relationships among the various sectors of the oil production and trade exclusively in terms of conflict or struggle.

As such, in my research on Izumi, a center of oil production just south of Osaka, I have worked to shed light on those aspects of the production processes and lived experiences. Specifically, I focus on Kadobayashi Sagohē (門林佐五平), a family of oil producers. The family maintains a rich archive of early modern documents (門林啓三氏所蔵文書). In this paper, working with these materials, I will discuss the small local merchants; the physical laborers; and, crucially, the supporting network of village and interfamilial bonds in which the house was embedded.

This approach also engages with the Japanese historiography in a broader sense. Yamaguchi Keiji argued that the growth of an increasingly fluid, commodity-centered economy during the early nineteenth century ate away at the status system, and prepared a "new foundation" in Japanese society that proved sturdy, yet receptive in the face of the intensifying waves of globalizing capitalism. However, Yamaguchi did not advance this argument. This paper provides a detailed picture of the everyday granularity of early modern social structures in which fine but spreading cracks appeared, whose collective inertia ultimately charted the course of historical change towards a new and vastly different world.

Introduction

During the Edo period, oil was a vital source of lamp fuel. Utilized by nearly every sector of society, it illuminated the homes of the ruling class and enabled peasants to perform nighttime work. Thus, there was a vast consumer market for oil and oil-based products. During the period in question, rapeseed and cottonseed were the main raw materials used to produce oil. Both were important commodities, the production and sale of which supported the reproduction of peasant households. In addition, oil dregs, which are a byproduct of the oil production process, were utilized as fertilizer. Accordingly, oil was a vital everyday commodity, supporting the lives of many early modern Japanese.

Rapeseed and cotton production were particularly prevalent in Western Japan's Kinai region (Mainly composed of Settsu, Kawachi, Izumi, Yamato and Yamashiro provinces). As a result, the Kinai emerged as Japan's oil processing center, and large numbers of merchants engaging in the distribution of oil and oilseeds settled in Osaka, the region's economic hub. Over time, the shogunate, in conjunction with a group of influential oil merchants, constructed a national distribution network centering on Osaka. For the shogunate, oil was a vital consumer commodity, second only to rice. Accordingly, they went to great lengths to control its price.

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What happened, then, when oil production and distribution began to penetrate rural Japan? How did the industry's expansion into Japan's hinterlands affect the social structure of rural communities? The theme of oil production and distribution was examined in the 1960s, in research focusing on the shogunal system's market structure, and in the 1970s, in studies analyzing the history of popular protests and uprisings¹. In much of that research, however, scholars characterized the relationships among the various sectors of the oil production and trade exclusively in terms of conflict or struggle, whether between oil producers and the Osaka merchants who were licensed to handle distribution of the finished product, or between those producers and the growers from whom they sourced seed.

This trend in the Japanese historiography is a reflection of its attention to contemporary political and social issues of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, within the context of strong demands to abolish the parasitic land owner system (寄生地主制) through post war agricultural land reform (農地改革), historians questioned the form of society under the feudal system of the Edo period, which was based on this kind of land policy. They also investigated how and why the feudal system collapsed. Also, during the campaign against the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty (安保闘争), these historians investigated how popular movements at the end of the Edo period against the control of prices of oil and seeds were carried out, and discussed who were the main actors of these movements.

There is much to learn from these earlier studies, which focused on the perspectives of the ruled class, and also introduced crucial documents from rural villages. However, as a result of their preoccupation with contemporary politics, they over-emphasized confrontational relations between the city and the village, as well as between different classes. Moreover, these works failed to recognize more complex relationships in people's everyday life.

As such, in my research on Izumi, a center of oil production just south of Osaka, I have worked to shed light on those aspects of the production processes and lived experiences that cannot be understood only through frameworks of opposition and conflict, though these of course remain important.

Specifically, I focus on Kadobayashi Sagohē (門林佐五平), a family of oil producers (絞油屋). Though long out of the business, to this day the family maintains a rich archive of early modern documents (門林啓三氏所蔵文書)².

For example, the collection contains many lists of real estate holdings and deeds, which I use to trace the movement of land and waterwheels. There are also many personal letters, from which I can examine how the Kadobayashi family tried to avoid financial trouble. From records of lawsuits, we can catch a glimpse into the business relationships of the house. From employment contracts, we can see the tense relationships between the small local merchants who proxied as seed stocking agents, as well as the physical laborers involved in the oil production process itself.

Additionally, there is a rich collection of documents about village officials from Ikedashimo Village (庄屋高橋家文書), from which we can understand what kind of position the oil producers, including Kadobayashi Family, occupied in the village³.

Working with these materials, with an eye on both conflict and cooperation, I have reconstructed the various and multi-faceted societal relationships that formed around the Kadobayashi, aiming towards a "total" comprehensive perspective. In this paper, I will discuss the small local merchants; the physical laborers; and, crucially, the supporting network of village and interfamilial bonds in which the house was embedded.

This approach also engages with the Japanese historiography in a broader sense. The influential historian Yamaguchi Keiji argued that the growth of an increasingly fluid, commodity-centered economy during the early nineteenth century ate away at the status system that had theretofore governed socio-economic relations, and so prepared a "new foundation" in Japanese society that proved sturdy, yet receptive in the face of the intensifying waves of globalizing capitalism that accompanied the mid-century opening of Japan⁴. However, Yamaguchi did not advance

1. The most representative study on policies of oil distribution is Tsuda (1961, 1977). For the local oil production and popular protests, see Yagi (1962).

2. Copies of this documents and all other unpublished documents cited in this paper, if not otherwise noted, can be accessed at the Izumi-shi Shi Hensanshitsu 和泉市史編さん室 (Office for the Compilation of Izumi City History).

3. See Machida (2004) for a detailed study of villages' social structures in Izumi based on village officials' documents.

4. See Yamaguchi (1993).

this argument, stimulating though it was, through the kind of close local analysis necessary to observe, comprehend, and describe this process in action at the level projects such as mine can provide; namely, the most fundamental: the everyday granularity of early modern social structures in which would have appeared the fine, but spreading cracks whose collective inertia ultimately charted the course of historical change towards a new and vastly different world.

I. Village and Household

Kadobayashi Sagohē was a peasant farmer from Ikeda-shimo Village. Ikeda-shimo was located in a valley formed by the Makio River, which runs from the Izumi Mountain Range to Osaka Bay (Figure 1). There were four waterwheels, which had been constructed on the banks of the Makio River, and Sagohe and his relatives used them to produce oil. The waterwheel was used to pulverize the rapeseed and cottonseed necessary for oil manufacturing). Sagohē’s household was a branch of the Kadobayashi Family, which was headed by Saemon. Saemon was a major local landowner and influential village official. The Kadobayashi House’s main and branch households were part of the same residential community. Notably, members of the Kadobayashi Family purchased all of waterwheels in the village using the Saemon’s fund and exerted exclusive control over the management of the oil business in the village⁵.

Table 1 shows Ikeda-shimo’s social composition⁶. In Ikeda-shimo, the total number of landholders peaked in the early nineteenth century at 191, and remained stable thereafter, reaching 197 at the start of the Meiji period. In the early nineteenth century, with holdings of around 100 *koku*, Kadobayashi Saemon was by far the village’s biggest landholder. In contrast, 47% of the village’s population (104) had holdings of less than 1 *koku*, or were completely alienated from land ownership. By the nineteenth century, therefore, Ikeda-shimo had clearly developed a bifurcated social structure, in which a small group of wealthy landowners controlled most of the village’s land, and many villagers had virtually no land at all.

Let us now turn to an examination of the place of oil producers in village society. While Kadobayashi Sagohē owned 57 *koku* of land and can be considered a major landowner, his holdings were reduced by more than half in

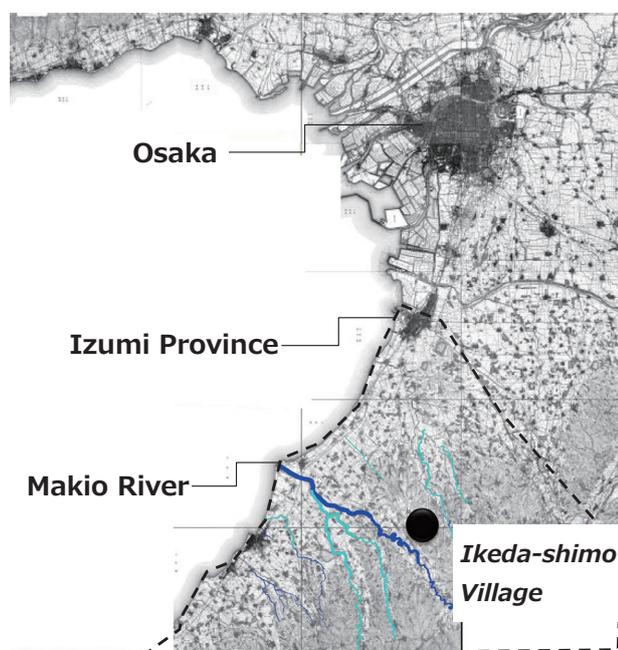


Figure 1: Ikeda-shimo village and Makio river

Table 1: Ikeda-simo village's Houses' social composition

Landholdings (koku /石)	a Genroku 5 [1692]	b Bunka Period [1804-18]	c 1871 (Meiji 4)
100~		1 Saemon	
70~100		2	2 Saemon
50~70	1 Shōya (Takahashi)	2 ●Sagohē	
30~50	6 Saemon	5 ●Chōemon	9
20~30	3	2	7 ●Yashichi
15~20	17	8	8
10~15	23	12 Shōya	12
5~10	33	22 ●Sadajirō	35 ●Chōemon ●Sagohē ●Tōzō
1~5	50	61	43
~1	23	76 ●Hanzō	81 Sadajirō
0 • mutaka (無高)	Unknown	28	48
Village's Population (Landholders)	Unknown (156)	219 (191)	245 (197)

●:Oil Producer

Source: a Menwari nayose chō,1692 in Takahashi ke monjo 高橋家文書

b "Ninbetsu jun nayose chō" in Takahashi ke monjo 高橋家文書

c "Koseki" in Takahashi ke monjo 高橋家文書

5. The topics in this section are discussed in detail in Shimazaki (2015) .

6. This table is based on information discussed in Machida (2004) .

Table 2: Landholdings and employment period of eight Kaikohired by Sagohē

Kaiko from Ikeda-shimo	Landholding (koku・石)	Employment period (year)
Heisuke (平助)	2.7401	1
Soube (惣兵衛)	0 (mutaka)	1
Saburoemon (三郎右衛門)	0.3500	19
Gihe (儀兵衛)	0 (mutaka/Leaseholding his house)	1
Tomekichi (留吉)	0 (mutaka)	1
Jinzaemon (甚左衛門)	0.3640	16
Sahe (佐兵衛)	0 (mutaka/Leaseholding his house)	1
Hachirobe (八郎兵衛)	0 (mutaka)	1

Source: Menwari Nayose Chō 免割名寄帳 1804-1872 in Takahashi ke monjyo 高橋家文書
 Watami jikigai karifuda torikime gaki in Kadobayashi ke monjo 門林家文書

In other words, most of the individuals employed as seasonal buyers were impoverished, and possessed no capital of their own. Rather, they were hired for limited periods and paid a wage. For most, the position of seasonal buyer was one in a series of occupations that they could perform in order to earn a wage and subsist.

Let us examine the case of Jin'emon, a buyer from nearby Urata Village⁸. He brokered shipments of rapeseed from farmers on behalf of Sagohē. He was caught, however, engaging in fraud. He was also sued for failing to repay fees for oil dregs he had purchased from Sagohē, and for failing to pay 15 koku of rice he owed Sagohē. As his example indicates, money lending often played a role in the relations that Sagohē maintained with the seasonal buyers he employed. While oil producers depended on the services provided by these buyers when attempting to procure raw materials, relations between the two groups was often complicated by disputes stemming from money lending.

III. The Manual Laborers Who Produced Oil

Lastly, I would like to mention the unskilled manual laborers who handled the actual duty of oil production. Generally, these laborers were seasonal workers from Izumi Province and the western part of present-day Hyogo Prefecture. Licensed brokers in Sakai, known as *fukuroya* (袋屋), supplied laborers to Izumi's oil producers, while local youth were employed on day contracts.

Although the wages paid to individual laborers varied depending on their skill level, they generally earned between 1 and 2 *monme* of silver. When compared with that of carpenters, who were paid 4.3 *monme* of silver in Osaka, the work performed by these laborers was unskilled manual labor. At the same time, however, unskilled laborers played an essential role in the oil production process, and without them production would have been impossible.

In Tenmei 4 [1784], a dispute over wages broke out between oil producers and the laborers they employed⁹. During that incident, laborers from Izumi Province formed their own association. The association collected initiation fees from would-be members, and obstructed the employment of individuals who refused to join. The core members of the association were local youths. They aimed to prevent the local oil producers from employing laborers who came from other regions, in order to keep their employment opportunities. In addition, utilizing the association as their base, Izumi's laborers engaged in collective wage negotiations with the local oil producers. Eventually, the association lost in the negotiations and was forced to apologize to the oil producers. As this incident shows, for local

8. Kawaguchi oyakusho shonegai hikae 川口御役所諸願控, 1831-32; Kadobayashi ke monjo 門林家文書

9. Hataraki nin domo yori chingin no gi ni tsuki karekore korearu setsu no shomotsu 働人共引賃銀之儀ニ付彼此有之節之書物, 1784.7; Kadobayashi ke monjo 門林家文書

youths, oil production was an important source of work and income during the off-season for farming. In order to keep their wages and employment opportunities, local youths formed bonds that extended beyond their individual villages.

In the case of Sagohē's family, there are a few materials indicating how workers were supplied. In Kouka 3[1846], a serious incident happened in Sagohē's house when a laborer raped his daughter, and the girl became pregnant. In a letter of apology, the laborer described his own record as follows¹⁰:

“I served at your (Sagohē's) place for a long time since my childhood, and in recent years, I have also been employed as a day contract laborer.”

The laborer lived in a neighboring village, Fuseya-Shinden. This case shows an example of a boy servant becoming a day contract laborer when he grew up. We can see that the oil producers tended to hire local people they knew well and could trust, such as young men they had been closely involved with since their childhood, although in this case the trust that Sagohē had placed in the laborer was broken.

In Ikeda-shimo Village, *wakamono* (若者: local youths, servants and laborers) were viewed as a source of local instability during the late-Tokugawa period.

In the third year of Keiō [1867], a new set of village regulations were issued, primarily in an attempt to intensify the regulation of *wakamono*¹¹. The regulations were deemed necessary because of a perceived decline in village order and discipline. Notably, they included a series of provisions specifically targeting laborers hired by local oil producers, with articles banning them from arguing, fighting, and gambling. The fact that these sorts of provisions were included in a body of village regulations is, no doubt, a reflection of the unique character of Ikeda-shimo as a center of oil production.

As we have seen, for local youths, oil production provided them important employment opportunities, while for the oil producers, the use of mainly local youths was crucial to the successful operation of their production activities. Hence, there was a largely stable partnership between oil producers and laborers. However, the outbreak of wage disputes and local authorities' anxiety over the unruly behavior of *wakamono* also show the tension between the ruling class (including oil producers) and *wakamono*.

IV. Conclusion

The relations examined in this paper represent only some of those established and maintained by oil producers. That said, they were relations that were linked to a desire on the part of villagers in Izumi Province to improve their lives. These relations were forged out of the transformation of village society, by the forces of commodity production and capital. Furthermore, they were more complex than a mere class struggle or relation of conflict.

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10. Issatsu 一札, 1784.3; Kadobayashi ke monjo 門林家文書

11. Murajyū kitei ren'in chō 村中規定連印帳, 1867.1; Kadobayashi ke monjo 門林家文書

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