

Taboo Words and *Saikū Imikotoba*

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Introduction

The word “taboo, tabu, tapu” as originally used in Polynesia, Melanesia, New Zealand, etc. means “set apart for or consecrated to a special use or purpose.”⁽¹⁾ Taboo is the prohibition or avoidance of behavior which is forbidden or discouraged in any society. What is considered as taboo is varied in different cultural contexts (Wardhaugh, 1998: pp.234-236). In today’s English, taboo words are terms that people avoid speaking. They are related to death, dying and the dead, sex, excretion, bodily functions, religious matters, and race. Usually these expressions are replaced with other terms in various ways. There is a long history of employing euphemisms to allude to offensive or tabooed words. Egyptians in ancient times called the dead-house, where bodies were turned into mummies, the “beautiful house,” and the ancient Greeks transformed the “Furies” into the “Eumenides” (the Kindly ones) (Rawson, 1995: pp.2-10). In the Japanese language, *saikū imikotoba*, “taboo words and their substituted terms at the *Saikū* palace,” was established in the 8th century. The use of language reveals social attitudes and historical significance of the practice. In this paper, *saikū imikotoba* will be examined by analyzing the meanings of the words, its establishment, and the social backgrounds of its enforcement.

Saikū Imikotoba

Before discussing *saikū imikotoba*, we briefly explain the *Saikū*, the *Saiō*, and Ise Jingū (the Grand Shrines of Ise). *Saikū* (*Saigū*), 齋宮 in Sino-Japanese characters, is also read “*Itsukinomiya*.” The *Saikū* refers to the palace of the *Saiō* and her servants’ public offices and residential compounds which existed in Ise until the mid-14th century. Although the term *Saikū* came to be used for the *Saiō* herself, in this paper, *Saikū* refers to the *Saikū* palace.⁽²⁾

The *Saiō*, 齋王, also referred to as “*Itsukino-no-himemiko*” was an unmarried Imperial princess who served at Ise Jingū on behalf of the emperor.⁽³⁾ The letter *sai*, 齋, is used for words such as *saikai* and *kessai*, both implying purification through abstinence. *Saiō* literally

means “princess of abstinence and purification,” residing in the Abstinence Palace. The first *Saiō* princesses are recorded in *Nihon shoki*, Japan’s first official history.⁽⁴⁾ Emperor Sujin’s daughter, Princess Toyosukiirihime-no-mikoto, moved the supreme deity, Amaterasu Ōmikami, from the Imperial palace and worshipped the kami at Kasanui village. During the reign of Emperor Suinin, Princess Yamatohime-no-mikoto set out to find the most suitable site to enshrine Amaterasu Ōmikami. After wondering for many years, the Princess finally arrived at Ise and founded Jingū (Hori, 1954; Umeda, 1956). An organized *Saiō* system was established by Emperor Tenmu in the latter half of the 7th century. The system lasted for about 660 years since his daughter, Princess Ōku-no-himemiko, was appointed to worship Ise Jingū on behalf of the Emperor.

Ise Jingū is principally composed of the Naikū (Inner Shrine) and the Gekū (Outer Shrine). Amaterasu Ōmikami, the ancestral kami (deity) of the Imperial Family as well as the tutelary kami of the Japanese people, is enshrined at the Naikū while Toyouke Ōmikami, the kami of agriculture and industry, is worshipped at the Gekū. Before the *Saiō* left for Ise, she had spent more than two years for purification at the Palace and then at *nonomiya*, “the field palace.” When the *Saikū* palace prospered in the 10th and 11th centuries, several hundred people including court ladies and male officials served the *Saiō*. The most important occasion of worship at Ise Jingū for the *Saiō* was the offering of sacred *futotamagushi* branches for the kami to indwell during the most significant rites held three times a year (Nakanishi, 1998: pp.30-31). The *Saiō* led a life of purification by avoiding pollution, impurity, Buddhist rites, and tabooed language. To obviate taboo terms and use their replacements was important at the palace. *Saikū imikotoba*, “taboo words and their substituted terms defined at the *Saikū* palace,” will be discussed in the following sections.

Definitions of *Imikotoba*

Imikotoba is translated as “a tabooed word” (*Saito’s Japanese-English Dictionary*, 2002), or “a ritually (religiously) tabooed word; a taboo word” (*Kenkyusha’s New Japanese-English Dictionary*, 2003). In a modern Japanese dictionary, *imikotoba* is defined as ① a word that should not be spoken because of taboo, and ② a substituted word of ① (*Shogakukan Nihon Kokugo Daijiten Vol.I*, 2000). *Kadokawa Kogo* (old language) *Daijiten Vol.I* (1982) describes both “a taboo word” and “a substituted word.” *Kadokawa Kogo Daijiten* refers to an example from *Shikawakashū* (1151) as well as *saikū imikotoba*.⁽⁵⁾ *Imikotoba* has meant in the Japanese language both “a taboo word” and “a substituted word of a taboo word” since the 8th century.

There are prominent research papers on *saikū imikotoba* by Umeda (1973), Andō (1974), and Nishimiya (1990, 2004). They give a definition of *saikū imikotoba* as “words substituted by

taboo words” (Umeda, 1973: p.54; Andō, 1974: p.347; Nishimiya, 2004: p.52). Andō (1974: p.334) and Nishimiya (1990: p.301; 2004: p.53) clearly state that *saikū imikotoba* is “ingo”---“jargon, slang, a secret language, or an argot” in today’s English translation. In this paper, the author refers to *saikū imikotoba* as it is.

Saikū Imikotoba is found in *Kōtaijingū-gishikichō* (804), *Engishiki* (905), *Yamatohimenomikoto-seiki* (at the beginning of or in the middle of the Kamakura period, 1185–1333), and in some other literature.⁽⁶⁾ While the number of the words and word order are slightly different, terms described as *saikū imikotoba* in these works are almost the same. The following are *saikū imikotoba* written in *Engishiki*, Vol. V *Saikūshiki* (1964: pp.98–100). The left are taboo words and the right are their replacements.

Saikū Imikotoba

Taboo Words	Substituted Words (pronunciation)
内七言 “Inner Seven Words”	
1 仏 (Buddha)	中子 (<i>nakago</i>)
2 経 (sutra)	染紙 (<i>somegami</i>)
3 塔 (pagoda)	阿良良岐 (<i>araragi</i>)
4 寺 (temple)	瓦葺 (<i>kawarabuki</i>)
5 僧 (Buddhist monk)	髮長 (<i>kaminaga</i>)
6 尼 (nun)	女髮長 (<i>mekaminaga</i>)
7 齋 (Buddhist monk’s meal)	片膳 (<i>katajiki</i>)
外七言 “Outer Seven Words”	
8 死 (death)	奈保留 (<i>naoru</i>)
9 病 (illness)	夜須美 (<i>yasumi</i>)
10 哭 (weep)	塩垂 (<i>shiotare</i>)
11 血 (blood)	阿世 (<i>ase</i>)
12 打 (strike)	撫 (<i>nazu</i>)
13 肉 (meat)	菌 (<i>kusabira</i>)
14 墓 (grave)	土壤 (<i>tsuchikure</i>)
別忌詞 (Others)	
15 堂 (Buddhist hall)	香燃 (<i>koritaki</i>)
16 優婆塞 (Buddhist layman)	角笈 (<i>tsunohazu</i>)

“Inner seven words” are all related to Buddhism. “Outer seven words” are concerned with pollution or impurity. “Inner” might indicate “inside Ise Jingū and the *Saikū*,” while “outer” is employed to suggest “outside Ise Jingū and the *Saikū*.” “Others” are set apart probably because they are relatively moderate Buddhist expressions (Andō, 1974: p.352).

Explanation of *Imikotoba*⁽⁷⁾

Taboo words, either Buddhist or pollution terms, are substituted by euphemistic or antonymous words or by terms which represent some characteristics of tabooed objects in a different way. It is not clear what some replacements are derived from or what they symbolized in particular. One thing in common is that all the substitutions have completely different sounds and letters from the original taboo terms.

“Inner Seven Words” (related to Buddhism)

1 *Nakago* means center. Buddha is seated in the center of a Buddhist hall or of *zushi*, a cupboard-like case with double doors.

2 *Somogami* literally means dyed paper. Sutra was written on dyed (yellow) paper.

3 *Araragi* is a plant. This plant resembled the top of a pagoda.

4 *Kawarabuki* is tile-roofing. Buddhist temples had tiled roofs while Shinto shrines had thatched roofs.

5 *Kaminaga* describes long hair. “Long hair” does not represent non-Buddhists with long hair. It indicates that a Buddhist returns to secular life and has long hair again. Thus the replaced word implies the opposite concept of (being or becoming) a Buddhist monk.

6 *Mekaminaga* literally means female long hair.

7 *Katajiki* indicates one meal. The tabooed expression “*toki*” refers to “one meal a day.” Therefore, “*katajiki*” illustrates a practice of “*jisai*” whereby Buddhists eat only once a day before noon.

“Outer Seven Words” (related to pollution, impurity, or injury)

8 *Naoru*, in ancient language, meant “to live,” the opposite word of “to die.” Death or dying was considered the greatest pollution.

9 *Yasumi*, in ancient language, meant “to recover from illness, recovery,” namely, the opposite meaning of “to become ill, illness.”

10 *Shiotare* is “weeping.” The taboo word “*naku*” expresses “weeping for the dead.” That is why this word was considered a taboo.

11 *Ase* is sweat. The taboo expression “*chi*” or blood included all kinds of blood including

menstruation.

12 *Nazu* indicates “stroke, pat” while “*utsu*” means “to strike a person.” This suggests that fights (striking and beating) might not be uncommon in the neighborhood of Ise Jingu and *Saikū* at this time.

13 *Kusabira* means mushroom. The tabooed object “*shishi*” could be meat of a wild boar or a deer. Eating animal flesh during “*kessai*” (purification through abstinence) was considered pollution.

14 *Tsuchikure* indicates the clod since a grave was made of earth.

Others

15 *Koritaki* is “incense burning.” Incense is burned in a Buddhist hall.

16 *Tsunohazu*: This word probably implies the characteristic of a hairstyle because *ubasoku*, a Buddhist layman, does not shave his head.

Establishment of *Saikū Imikotoba* and Its Backgrounds

It is not agreed among scholars when *saikū imikotoba* was established (Andō, 1974; Nishimiya, 2004). Strictly avoiding words against Buddhism is a salient character of “inner seven words.” Since Buddhism was officially introduced into Japan in 538, taboo against Buddhism had not existed before that year. Therefore, *Gishiikichō*’s (804) description that *Saikū imikotoba* was founded by Princess Yamato-hime in prehistoric period seems unlikely (Andō, 1974: p.350). The establishment of *saikū imikotoba* could be sometime after 701 A.D. when *Taihō Ritsuryō*, the Code of the Taihō period, was promulgated (Andō, 1974: p.352), or after the latter half of the Nara Period (710–784 A.D.) (Nishimiya, 2004: p.56).

The avoidance of speaking evil words is based on the *kotodama* belief.⁽⁸⁾ *Kotodama* literally means “words” (*koto*) and “soul or spiritual power” (*dama, tama*). Words have mysterious power to make something auspicious or evil happen by simply verbalizing them. Since pronouncing taboo words could negatively influence people’s minds and pollute a Shinto ritual and *saikai* (abstinence), Buddhist terms were averted and substituted by other expressions (Okada, 1982: pp.360–364). *Saikū imikotoba* was used at Ise Jingu as well as the *Saikū* (Andō, 1974: p.350). Strict avoidance of “inner seven words” was not observed at the other Shinto shrines and *Saiin*.⁽⁹⁾ It is of great importance to point out why such prohibitions against Buddhism were recognized and enforced at Ise Jingu.

Buddhism formally entered Japan in 538 although some Buddhist influence had already existed before that year. Emperor Yōmei (reigned 585–587), Prince Shōtoku (574–622), and Empress Suiko (reigned 592–628) contributed greatly to Buddhism. In the Nara Period,

Buddhism gained national status, and many temples were constructed, including Tōdai-ji and its big statue of Birushana by the order of Emperor Shōmu (reigned 724–749). Jingū-ji, or “shrine temples” (temples attached to shrines), also began to be built in the eighth century. Ise Jingū, as distinguished from the other shrines at the top of Japan’s Shinto shrines, had its Jingū-ji temple in 767 (Tanaka, 1985: p.238). However the temple was moved away from the vicinity of Ise Jingū in 772 owing to “*tatari*” (curse because of insult to kami) by Tsukiyomi-no-kami.⁽¹⁰⁾ And again in 780, Ise Jingū requested to move the temple further away since “*tatari*” still did not cease. This reveals how strongly Ise Jingū was determined to avoid amalgamation with Buddhism (Tanaka, 1985: pp.244–245; Sakamoto, 1965: pp.101–102). Establishment and strict observance of *saikū imikotoba*, especially “inner seven words,” exemplify supreme divinity and dignity of Ise Jingū (Umeda, 1973: pp.69–71; Andō, 1974: pp.364–365; Nishimiya, 1990: p.309).

Summary

Saikū imikotoba, which consists of taboo words and their substituted terms, has existed in the Japanese language since the 8th century. There are sixteen replaced expressions which have no resemblance to the original terms in sounds and letters while the derivation of their substitution is varied. Since verbalizing taboo words, particularly Buddhist-related terms, could pollute Shinto rituals, those expressions were strictly avoided. *Saikū imikotoba* is characterized by its “inner seven words,” prohibitions against Buddhist terms. Ise Jingū, the most honored shrines among all Shinto sanctuaries, and the *Saikū*, the *Saiō*’s palace, preserved purity by abstaining from all pollution including the tabooed language.

[Notes]

- (1) J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner. (1989). *The Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition, Volume XVII*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- (2) Descriptions concerning the *Saikū*, and the *Saiō* are based on Ellwood (1967), *Guidebook of Saikū historical museum* (2000, Saikū rekishi hakubutsukan), Emura (1996), and *Encyclopedia of Shinto*.
- (3) If there was no daughter of the emperor, one of the emperor’s close relatives was selected by divination. Often *Saiō* princesses were young children.
- (4) *Nihon shoki* was presented to the court in 720 in the reign of Emperor Genshō. *Nihon shoki* was compiled by Prince Toneri, and it consists of a record described chronologically, including mythology from the age of the kami (*Encyclopedia of Shinto*).
- (5) *Shikawakashū*, a selection of Japanese poems, was compiled by Fujiwara Akisuke in 1151.
- (6) *Kōtaijingū-gishikichō* and *Toyukegū-gishikichō* were compiled in 804 as *Enryaku-gishikichō*. *Engishiki* was compiled and submitted to the sovereign in 927. *Yamatohimenomikoto-seiki* is one of the works in *Shinto-Gobusho*, basic text of medieval Ise Shinto.
- (7) While most explanation of the words are based on Nishimiya (1990, 2004), some are on the

author's speculations.

- (8) Descriptions concerning the *kotodama* belief are based on Okada (1982), Umegaki (1977), and Motegi (2003).
- (9) The *Saiin* was an unmarried princess who served at the Kamo Shrines in Kyoto. *Saiin* also referred to the residence of a Kamo princess. The *Saiin* system was established by Emperor Saga in 818, and it was discontinued in the early thirteenth century. The avoidance of Buddhism was not as strict as it was at *Saikū* in Ise. Emperor Murakami's daughter, Princess Senshi (served 975–1031) believed in Buddhism when she was the Kamo *Saiin* (Tokoro, 1989, 2000).
- (10) Tsukiyomi-no-kami is one of the “three most august children” of Izanagi-no-kami. The kami is a younger brother of the supreme deity, Amaterasu Ōmikami.

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