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Sexology *Versus* Folklore: The Argument Over a Native Conception of Gender In Early 1920s Japan

Dr. Daniele Durante
Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy

Abstract

In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan, when parents feared their children may die before reaching adulthood, they could dress and raise their children as the opposite gender to bestow upon them the gods' protection and thus wish them a long life. Scholars have investigated this phenomenon by focusing on its social, cultural, and religious significance. However, experts have not studied the lively debate that the practice sparked in the early 1920s. On one side of the controversy was sexologist Sawada Junjirō (1863-1944), a vocal and prolific practitioner of the science recently imported from the West, who deemed the custom a “superstition” (*meishin*) that had to be eradicated from society lest it damage the public health of the “ignorant people” (*gumin*). On the other side of the dispute was mycologist and folklorist Minakata Kumagusu (1867-1941), an eclectic thinker whose nuanced and sophisticated worldview bore the influence of Buddhism, who defended the custom as part of popular wisdom, or, in his parlance, as the “way of the people” (*gushadō*). By closely examining and commenting on the essays in which these intellectuals discussed the phenomenon of dressing their children as the opposite gender, this paper aims at illustrating the main concepts and articulations of the Sawada-Minakata disagreement. In this manner, the paper will uncover an aspect, not yet researched, of the intensive process whereby Japanese sexologists colonised the country's indigenous notions of gender and how instead Japanese of divergent opinions valorised their cultural heritage.

Keywords: gender and folklore; gender and religion; history of sexology in japan; minakata studies; societal attitudes toward gender-variant people