

Japanese Folksongs Created by Child Nursemaids¹

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Synopsis

This essay introduces Japanese nursery songs composed by children who nursed babies as work. It was a slavery job. The songs express the nursemaid's sadness, loneliness and despair. She describes her hardships and growing ill will toward the baby. She warns her master to treat her well or else she will mistreat the baby. She often thinks of her lonely death, yet she finds joy in singing and saves herself. The nursemaid songs are an example of voices from oppressed people in Japan.

I Introduction

Among countless Japanese nursery songs there is a large group of unique lullabies which were created in a span of about 100 years before 1945 by children who nursed babies as work. Unlike most European lullabies, the Japanese nursemaid songs do not express peace and happiness. The lyrics are usually sad or angry, and the subjects hardly ever concern love for the baby. These songs have a unique beauty that touches one deeply. It would not be an overstatement to say that almost all Japanese know and have a special affection for the very sad lullaby, "Itsuki no komori uta." ²(*komori* means "nursemaid" and *uta* means "song" in Japanese.) It expresses the feeling of a nursemaid slave who wishes to escape from her hardships. I quote the best known version below.

When *bon** comes, when *bon* comes, when *bon* comes, I'll leave here.
If *bon* comes soon, I'll go home soon.

If I die, who will cry?
Only crows and cicadas in the mountains.

If I die, bury me on the roadside.
Every passerby will give me a flower.

What flower? Camellia, camellia.
Heaven will give me water. Heaven will bless me with water³.

[*"Itsuki no komori uta,"* Kumamoto pref./ Machida ⁴, vol. South Kyushu: 12]

* Bon: a few days in summer when people visit their ancestors' graves and pray to the spirits. It is believed that the ancestors' spirits come back to this world and visit their families during this period. Bon is one of the two family gathering times in Japan; the other is New Year.

The nursemaids were mostly five to twelve-year old girls⁵. Their families were so poor that they could not support all of their children, so the parents sent some of their children to richer farmers or merchants as nursemaids. In some communities, as in Itsuki village where *"Itsuki no komori uta"* was originally sung, the peasants were expected to send all of their female children, when they became a certain age, to the land-owner family for some decided number of years in order to pay a part of the rent. In the master's house the nursemaids were given meals and coarse clothing but no salary. On top of babysitting, they had to wash diapers in the river, help in the kitchen, mend clothes, and do other chores around the house. The life of the nursemaids was difficult and they missed their families. They hated their job, and often they hated the babies whom they had to carry on their backs all day. They sang songs while rocking the baby. The songs express all kinds of emotion: sadness, loneliness, despair, anger, malignity, desire to enjoy life, and vague hope for a better future.

The composers of these songs are unknown. Some songs have their own music, but many songs use music from other types of folksongs sung by women, such as rice farm songs or stone mill work songs. Regardless of the original music, the melodies of these songs are usually monotonous with the rhythm of a slow walk or rocking a baby, except some songs which accompany children's play. They were usually passed on among nursemaids while working. The nursemaids spent the daytime together in groups because they were banned from the houses and farms where adults were work-

ing. They were often on streets and sometimes stayed in the shrine yards.

These nursemaids, under such slavery conditions, started to disappear when the hierarchy of the landowner and the peasants was destroyed and child labor was prohibited by the postwar policy. However, the tradition of nursemaid songs remained. During the folksong revival movement in the 70's and 80's, some of these songs got on the hit chart. "Takeda no komori uta" is one of them.

The nursemaid hates the season after *bon*.

It snows and the baby cries.

This baby cries all the time. This baby pulls my hair.

I get thinner day by day nursing the baby.

I want to go home. I want to leave this village.

Far over there I see my parents' house.

[*"Takeda no komori uta," 1974: sung by a music group, 'Off Course'*⁶]

Along with the new arrangement of "Takeda no komori uta" by 'Off Course,' various singers made popular records with "Itsuki no komoriuta" and other nursemaid songs from different areas. Some new lullabies, such as "Shimabara no komori uta" made by a novelist, MIYAZAKI Ko'hei (1917-1980), follow the tradition of nursemaid songs and became much loved by people.

Although these popular nursemaid songs tend to focus on the nursemaid's sadness, the orally inherited songs, without the influence of radio broadcast, have a wide subject range. There are songs in which a nursemaid sings of her love or resentment toward her parents, songs that describe her job and hardships, songs in which she criticizes the master and mistress who mistreat her, and songs that show her love of singing and the way she enjoys her life in spite of the difficult circumstances. I would like to introduce some songs according to subject, to illustrate the emotions and creativity of the young people who had to work for survival while they were still immature.



Nursemaids spent day time together in groups. Photograph taken by Felicien Challaye, published in his *Le Japon Illustre* (1915:55), cited in "Songs as Weapons: Culture and History of *Komori* (Nursemaids) in Modern Japan" by Mariko Asano Tamanai (*The Journal of Asian Studies* 50-4, November 1991:795).

II Nursemaids and Their Parents

A nursemaid was usually taken to her master's house by her parent on the day she started working. On that day the master and the girl's parent made a contract. To her, it did not seem fair that they made a contract about her without asking if she approved of it or not. This song describes her frustration:

Don't cry, don't moan, don't cry any more.
Even if you cry, I can't feed you with my breast.

I can't do anything about myself.

Myself, confined for years in a sheet of (contract) paper.

[Mie Pref./ Machida, vol. Kinki: 567]

In this song she tells the baby not to cry, and at the same time, she also tells herself not to cry. The baby does not stop crying because it is hungry for its mother's breast; the nursemaid feels like crying because she has no freedom or power to leave the situation just as the baby cannot walk to its mother by itself. There is another song in which a girl sings of humiliation. She felt humiliated when she was taken to the master's house by her father.

I'm stupid, stupid, a stupid man's daughter.

I ask of you, clever man, to keep me in your house.

[Kumamoto pref./ Hakushu⁷: 354]

Probably the girl's father left her with the master saying that he himself is a stupid man and naturally his daughter is stupid; by saying so the father meant to ask the master for great patience about her mistakes. Being humble and saying little humiliating things about oneself or one's family so that the others can feel protected and at ease is a way of communication in Japan. However, the girl felt hurt when she heard that her father and she were "stupid" and inferior to the master.

In TAKAYAMA Sumiko's autobiography, *You'll Become a Little Buddha (Nono-san ni narundayo)*, she describes her own experience of becoming a nursemaid. She did not think it was fair that her father made her work for three years in exchange of her board and two rolls of *kimono* cloth. She writes,

In April 1930 I entered Inukai Elementary School which was run by Mizuho village. There were 48 students in my class.

When I was in the fourth grade, I became a nursemaid at my relative's house. The master was my father's cousin. He was a farmer and had a big family. The family also had a paper making factory, and they probably were too busy to take care of their children.

It seemed that my parents and the master had an "agreement" that the master would let me go to school and give me two rolls of plainly woven silk *kimono* cloth if I lived there and worked as a nursemaid. Two rolls of thin *kimono* cloth for three years of consecutive work!

.....

I nursed a baby from four o'clock in the morning till the time I went to school. Farmers got up very early. In that house all the family members got up at four. Strangely enough little children woke up with their mother. They started crying at four. I pretended to be fast asleep, but the mother opened the paper slide door of my room and made me get up by kicking my legs. So, from four o'clock until the time I went to school I took care of two of their children, carrying a baby on my back and holding a three-year old child by the hand.

When I came home from school, a family member used to find me from a distance and shouted, "Hurry up! Come here, hurry up!"

During the harvest season the family worked until midnight. They separated unhulled rice from the straw and got rid of the hull. I wondered when the wife and husband rested. While they were up I had to babysit their children.⁸

Takayama's case was not particularly severe. It may be said that she was rather fortunate among nursemaids because she was allowed to go to school. She could rest at school. However, regardless of the condition of their work, the nursemaids were still very young and sorely missed their families. A nursemaid sings:

I want to leave here as soon as possible.

I want to go home crossing the sea, over the mountains.

I want to see the face of my mother and my father.

[Niigata pref./ Hakushu: 186]

The nursemaid in the next song says that she needs someone to listen to her complaint. The way she analyzes her homesick feeling in this song is interesting:

I want to go home. I want to see my house.

I want to see my mother.

I don't particularly want to see her face, but

I want to talk about my hardships at work.

[Aichi pref./ Hakushu: 115]

As she cannot go home, she talks to her mother in a song:

Mother, I was scolded again, today.

I cannot let anybody know how I feel.
 I will cry till dawn.
 With the first sunlight I will run away.

[Kochi pref./ Hakushu: 323]

Her imagination and yearning for the family almost brings the family to her:

When I see those mountains, I miss my home terribly.
 I can almost hear the voices of my parents and brothers and sisters.

I wish they were the voices of my family.
 They are the voices of foxes and racoons.

[Nara pref./ Hakushu: 236]

She knows the reality and becomes uneasy about the idea that her mother might forget her:

I wonder if my mother is awake or asleep now.
 I wonder if she remembers me.

One wants to go home as many times as
 All the grass on the path home will disappear from being walked on.

[Hyogo pref./ Hakushu: 235]

She is irritated and has to hate something:

That mountain is too high. I can't see my house.
 I miss my home. I hate that mountain.

[Mie pref./ Hakushu: 140]

Some nursemaids were more realistic and rather blamed their parents than missing them. A nursemaid says in a song:

My father dared to make me work as a nursemaid.

He is my enemy, not my father.

[Aichi pref./ Hakushu: 122]

In another version of the same song she is cynical:

I don't want to be a nursemaid, but I must.

My father told me so.

My father dared to make me work as a nursemaid.

Why didn't he make me a beggar instead?

[Kyoto pref./ MKH⁹, CD brochure: 56]

When she feels that nobody is on her side, she thinks of her death:

How can my father be called a father?

He made me serve the master when I was only seven or eight.

I want to die. I want to quit this world.

I wonder if I can become a flower and have fruit if I die.

[Shiga pref./ MKH: 182]

Here is another song in which a nursemaid again thinks of death but she hesitates because she is concerned about her parents.

This baby cries. I will die.

I will become the soil on the field and the mountain.

Is it right to die so young, when I'm only thirteen or fourteen?

How could I make my parents carry a star anise branch in the funeral march * ?

[Mie pref./ Hakushu: 134]

* Star anise, an evergreen tree, is used as funeral decoration. In some sect of Buddhism the family of the dead march to the graveyard with a star anise branch, to which a long white ribbon is tied, in their hands. Star anise is also used to decorate the grave and is often planted in the graveyard.

Whether they liked their parents or not, those who had parents could go home some day. On the other hand orphans and children who were given away by their parents because of poverty or some other reasons had little hope to get out of the circumstance. There are many songs that express the misery of orphans.

It's freezing this morning. If they were my own parents,
They would stop me from going and let me stay home.

I'm afraid of strangers. I'm afraid of dark nights.
Parents are good to have, and so are moon-lit nights.

Do not look down on me for not having parents.
I have parents. They are in Heaven.

[Okayama pref./ MKH: 26]

When a nursemaid's parents were dead and she was taken care of by her older brother, the first son of the family, she had a hard time with her sister-in-law.

If I go home, my sister-in-law will torture me with
Terrible smoke by burning live green pine leaves.

[Wakayama pref./ Hakushu: 237]

I have no parents. I'm a burden to my sister-in-law.
Wherever I turn my face, I have to shed blood tears.

[Shiga pref./ Hakushu: 234]

In the next song an orphan nursemaid compares herself with a dead pine tree; the listener can feel how insecure she was:

I have no parents, no brothers, no sisters.
A dead pine tree on a rock. So helpless.

Worship the setting sun if you don't have parents, because
Your parents are in the center of the sun.

Orphans are plovers on the sea.
They get their sleeves wet in rain.

An orphan is told to bring water in the morning.
Is the pail leaking, or is it your tears?

Orphans are miserable.
They stand at gates while biting the end of their sleeves.

[Mie pref./ Hakushu: 139]



Two nursemaids. The girl in front has a coat and an umbrella to avoid rain and sun light. The girl in the back has a thin cloth tied around her head so that her hair does not hurt the baby's eyes. *Nihon Minzoku Bunka Taikei* vol. 10: *Ie to Josei* [Homes and Women] (1985: 235). Property of Peabody Museum.

All the nursemaids were lonely regardless if they were orphans or not. The solitude and the hardships were too much for them to bear. They were only about ten years old. In many songs they sing of dying:

It is said that a spirit comes back to this world after death, because each spirit is a buddha.
I will kill myself to make them know what they have done to me.

[Aichi pref./ Hakushu: 122]

If I die, please put star anise flowers
On the ground to mark my grave.

[Gifu pref./ Hakushu: 128]

III Hardships and Growing III Will

(1) "It's hard, it's hard, it's hard to be a nursemaid"

Songs about hardships are the major part of Japanese nursemaid songs. There were many reasons that the nursemaids' lives were so painful. The lack of warm clothes was one of the reasons. SHIMIZU Hatsuno talked to a folklorist, OGAWA Kinjiro, about how poorly the nursemaids were clothed in her home village (Mie pref.) as follows:

[The nursemaid songs she knows were] sung by the poor fishermen's daughters who had come to work as nursemaids at farmers' houses in my village. The daughters of poor farmers also became nursemaids.

They came with no belongings. They were offered no money, not even a mon [a small monetary unit]. They were given new clothes twice a year, but that was only a *kimono*, an *obi* [band] and an apron for summer, a *kimono* with lining cloth, an *obi* and an apron for winter. If one had a new pair of wooden sandals for New Year, people said her master was generous. The parents of the nursemaids were satisfied with the condition because they could not afford to keep all of their children at home.

[Mie pref./ Machida, vol. Kinki: 568]

The weather in Japan was not easy for nursemaids to bear in poor clothing. It was very hot and humid in summer and severely cold in winter. It rained often and snowed in winter. A nursemaid complains about the weather:

Whether baby-sitting is easy or hard, if you want to know,
Try for half a year during the summer.

Baby-sitting is painful in November and December.
It snows; the baby frets and cries.

[Aichi pref./ Hakyushu: 122]

MASUDA Sayo, who was given to a landowner family to work as a nursemaid when she was very young, remembers how painful it was to stay outside in winter with bare feet on wooden sandals.

It was cold in the day time, too. When I was carrying a baby on my back, my back wasn't cold but my feet were frozen. They did not give me socks even during the coldest time of the year. I used to stand on one foot and put the other foot on the side of the thigh of the standing leg to keep the foot warm. From time to time I changed feet. Because of the way I stood on one leg and kept the other leg bent on one side I was called "Crane."¹⁰

There is a song in which a nursemaid complains about cold feet:

I must take care of the baby now, but I don't want to.
My feet become so cold and the baby cries.

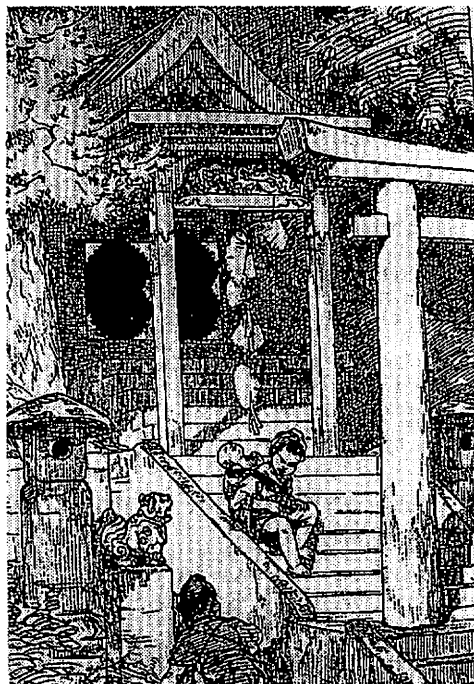
[Ishikawa pref./ Hakushu: 181]

The adults banned the nursemaid from the house while the adults were out for work. The nursemaid and the baby were not welcomed at any place. The song quoted in the previous paragraph continues thus:

If I go back to the house, the baby's mother is mad.
If I go out to the yard, the baby's father is mad.
If I go out through the front door, the baby's grandmother is mad.
If I go to the gate, the neighborhood children are hard on me.
If I go to the rice paddies, crows peck me.
If I go to the mountains, wild roses prick me.

[Ishikawa pref./ Hakushu: 181]

Nobody invited her in and she stayed outside. On a rainy or windy day, she was especially miserable.



Nursemaids were banned from houses and farms. They usually stayed in the shrine yard. Other children also played there. Drawing by Felix Regamey, published in *Promenades Japonaises: Tokio-Nikko* (1880), cited in *Bakumatsu Meiji no Seikatsu Fukei [Japanese Life and Landscape in the 19th Century]* edited by Isawo Suto (1995: 30).

It's hard to stay with a baby all day.
 I have no place to avoid rain and wind.
 If I stand under somebody's eaves,
 I'm told "Go away, go there, not there, here."
 They don't like me. They want to get rid of me.
 This is how I spend days while serving as a nursemaid.

[Tochigi pref./ MKH:16]

It must have been very sad for a young person that everybody wanted her to stay away. A nursemaid expresses her feelings in a song with the image of mountains in winter:

With pain in my mind, I went out through the back door.

All the mountains were covered with snow.

[Mie pref./ Hakushu: 135]

The mountain often symbolizes the obstacle which stands in the way of their home. The snow that had covered mountains in the above song cut out her hope of escaping and going home over the mountains. The mountain landscape suggests that the chilly and desperate feeling of the nursemaid is so strong that it cannot be removed.

There are songs that describe the work of the nursemaids. In one song a nursemaid says she is so tired because she walks around all day with a baby:

I have to carry a baby on my back all day, a baby who cries all the time.

My legs become as stiff as sticks or canes.

[Hyogo and Wakayama pref./ Hakushu: 227]

Sometimes she cannot avoid an accident and the baby gets hurt. If that happens, she is in serious trouble. The singer of the next song scorns a fellow nursemaid who didn't do a good job.

That nursemaid didn't take care of the baby well.

The baby was wounded, the nursemaid couldn't return the house.

She slept under the eaves at night.

[Mie pref./ Hakushu: 141]

Even though a nursemaid did not make an obvious mistake, the adults could blame her for anything. She sings:

We nursemaids live a more miserable life than being dead.

When the baby cries, they think I teased it.

When it is in a good mood, they think I cheated it.

When it is asleep, they think I killed it.

It's hard, it's hard, it's hard to be a nursemaid.

[Yamagata pref./ Hakushu: 84]

There were some other elements which made the life of nursemaids so difficult. In many cases they had other work to do besides babysitting. Masuda writes about her obligations when she was a nursemaid:

They woke me up at five in the morning and made me go to the river to wash clothes. In the country side community, people had an agreement to use one stream for washing the dishes and another stream for clothes. Both streams were frozen in winter, but there was a spot where the ice was not so thick because everybody washed there. I broke the thinner ice and washed diapers. I was a little child and slow on the job, so the diapers were all frozen before I rinsed them. I picked them up and put them in the river water again and rinsed them while trying to warm up my chapped hands by blowing on them. After washing I cleaned the rooms, and had breakfast. After breakfast I started baby-sitting.¹¹



Fighting boy nursemaids. Drawing by C. Netto, published in *Papier-schmetterling aus Japan* (1887), cited in *Bakumatsu Meiji no Seikatsu Fukei* (1995: 29).

Many nursemaids worked until late at night. The night work was hulling rice, mending clothes, pounding rice straws to make slippers and other things. Girl nursemaids were more welcomed than boy nursemaids because,

Boy nursemaids can't work at night.

They can't pound rice straw, nor can they make straw things, all night long.

[Gifu pref./ MKH: 170]

It seems that girls had the pleasure of teasing boy nursemaids. Girls mock boys in these songs:

Boy nursemaid, don't you feel foolish?

All day you pat/touch a girl's ass/bottom * .

[Nara pref./ Hakushu: 223]

* This line can be interpreted either crude or teasingly humorous.

Boy nursemaid, don't you feel foolish?

You don't know any songs, and the baby keeps crying.

[Hyogo pref./ Hakushu: 223]

Boy nursemaid, don't you feel ashamed?

Nursemaids are to be girls. That's the way it is.

[Hyogo pref./ Hakushu: 223]

I don't like boy nursemaids.

They don't have good hips. They just ramble around.

[Wakayama pref./ Hakushu: 224]

Even though the girls had pride in themselves, it was not easy for them to work all the time and have little sleep. They sing,

I hate to be a nursemaid, Mother. I hate it.

I'm so busy. I can't even comb my hair.

[Mie pref./ Hakushu: 139]

I want to sleep. I'm so sleepy.

Who is this person that tells me to grind wheat in the summer night?

[Kagawa pref./ Machida, vol. Kanto: 13]

(2) "When you cry, you are ugly"

One of the hardest things for the nursemaids was that the babies cried all the time except when asleep. This was probably because they were tied to the nursemaids' backs all day. The nursemaids were often scolded when the babies cried. A nursemaid says in a song,

This baby cries and I can't swallow food.

I drink tea to help the food down at all three meals.

[Mie pref./ Machida, vol. Kinki: 568/ MKH: 224]

In another song, she says,

I don't like taking care of a baby who cries a lot.

They blame me and hit my head.

[Kumamoto pref./ Machida, vol. South Kyushu: 20]

There are songs that express the helplessness of a nursemaid:

Rocking a crying baby to sleep, I can't help but crying myself.

As I go along, the sun goes away.

I tried to ask the way, but tears wouldn't let me.

The fields, the mountains, ah, this little boy on my back.

[Iwate pref./ MKH: 128]

Bitter, bitter.

They don't like whatever I do.

Painful, painful, that's all I can feel.

I look older than my real age.

This baby cries, and sunny days turn cloudy.

Clear moon nights are spoiled by rain.

[Mie pref./ Hakushu: 133]

When she cannot control her emotion, she hits the baby, but that does not do any good.
The next song comically describes the frustration of the nursemaid, but with sympathy.

The nursemaid is crazy. She hits the crying child.

She hits the child, and the child cries more.

She hits the child more, and the child cries more and more.

[Gifu pref./ Hakushu: 129]

Cruel words were better than hitting because the baby did not understand what was said. Nursemaids released the overflowing emotion in songs.

If you die, your parents will cry.

I will be happy, *yoi, yoi*.

[Saitama pref./ Hakushu: 29]

A nursemaid life is miserable. I spend time on roads and streets.

My master scolds me. The child tortures me.

Where do you want me to stand? You, a devilish crying baby.

If you cry hard and long like this, I will surely be worn out.

Why don't you cry sometimes on your mother's lap?

[Chiba pref./ Hakushu: 26]

When this baby cries, I'll put the baby in a straw bag.

I'll send the bag to Tosa Shimizu *.

Tosa Shimizu is deeper than the sea.

The bottom is boiling oil that will kill this baby.

[Nara pref./ Hakushu: 229]

* Tosa Shimizu is located at the southern end of Shikoku island. There was a marine transportation trade system between Tosa Shimizu port and Osaka port. In this song Tosa Shimizu is referred to as the farthest place that one can ever reach.

The first two lines of the next song are heard in many songs sung in various places.

A sleeping baby has a lovable face.

A crying baby has an ugly face.

It is uglier than a poisonous snake.

[Shimane pref./ MKH: 32]

After all the struggling with her own emotion, the nursemaid is lonelier and only thinks of escaping.

I don't like strangers' food.

Though it doesn't have bones, it hurts my throat.

I don't like this place.

Nobody comes to visit me. I receive no letters.

I won't stay here for two years.

A year is the longest I can stay. I will leave in February.*

On February the second,

I will pack my things, and pick up my wooden sandals.

[Kumamoto pref./ Machida, vol. South Kyushu: 12]

* This nursemaid was probably going to finish her work period before the New Year on the lunar calendar. Japan started using the solar calendar in 1872, but people in many regions celebrated the New Year, harvest, and other important things according to the lunar calendar custom.

When babies did not sleep, the nursemaid would have sung songs which threatened the babies saying that a wolf or a monster or something horrible would come to get them if they didn't go to sleep quickly. Here is an attractive short song on the same subject. A quick repetition of "don't cry, don't cry, don't cry" conveys the feeling of a nursemaid.

Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, child.

If you cry, a kite [bird] will carry you away.

Go to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep, child.

[Nara pref./ Machida, vol. Kinki: 373]

In the next song a nursemaid is not just telling the baby to go to sleep but is talking to the baby so that one can see there is communication between the nursemaid and the baby. Because of the playful tone, this song is an unusual, heart warming piece among the scare-baby songs.

If you don't go to sleep, I will let a wolf eat you.

You are afraid of wolves, aren't you?

You will go to sleep, won't you?

[Kyoto pref./ Machida, vol. Kinki: 110]

There is a song by which one can tell that the nursemaid is really fed up with the baby.

Go to sleep now, and wake up in the morning.

In the morning, you'll have a dream of a birth.

Please sleep, through one night and two nights.

Three nights, four nights, please sleep, sleep, sleep.

I get skinnier every day because I am the nursemaid of this baby.

The *obi* goes around my waist three or four times.

If you don't go to sleep when I tell you to go to sleep,

I will hit you, I will poke you, and

I will throw you away, that's what I will do.

[Kumamoto pref./ Machida, vol. South Kyushu: 20]

Sometimes the threatening is full of malice.

Don't cry, don't cry, I don't want a baby who cries.

If you cry, you'll fall in the boiling pot of hell.

[Kagoshima pref./ Hakushu: 353]

This scare-the-baby tactic seems to have stimulated the nursemaids' imaginations. As we have seen, in some songs we hear surprisingly cruel penalties for not sleeping. Singing probably helped the nursemaids control hatred by releasing their anger. The following song is the most shocking of all. The quotation is the last part of a long song. The song starts with widely known, heart-warming lullaby lyrics. The mood, however, gradually changes turning into a horrible, almost unimaginable scene. The listener easily notices the growing ill will of the nursemaid in the sequence of the song. The third stanza of the next quotation is often heard in different versions of the song sung from the area west of Kyoto to Okayama prefecture.

Baby-sitting is a hard job. After this season
Snow flakes will fall. The baby will cry. *Yo-ho-ho.*

Go to sleep. Have a good sleep.
When you cry, you are ugly. *Yo-ho-ho.*

I'll put the ugly baby on the cutting board.
I'll cut it as I cut a bunch of green vegetables. *Yo-ho-ho.*

I'll cut you. I'll mince you. I'll fry you in oil.
I'll make candles of the fried flesh and light the corners of the streets. *Yo-ho-ho.*

Passers-by will pray for you.
Your parents will shed blood-tears. *Yo-ho-ho.*

[Kyoto pref./ MKH: 129-131]

IV Criticizing the Master and the Mistress

Some songs prove that the nursemaids could face reality and criticize their masters and mistresses. Sometimes they would even warn the masters and mistresses as one can hear in this song:

If you love your child, let your nursemaid eat a rice cake.

If the maid falls, your child will also fall.

[Kumamoto pref./ Hakushu: 353]

The nursemaids strongly felt discrimination at meal times.

"She is only a nursemaid, only a nursemaid," you say, and

You give me pickles and a little rice with tea. Just that.

It would not do me wrong if you gave me fish sometimes.

[Shizuoka pref./ Hakushu: 117]

Are the birds crying in the mountains because they are in love?

No, they cry because they want sweet rice cake.

[Mie pref./ Hakushu: 140]

I hate being a nursemaid. I hate it.

What I eat is only garbage.

Beggars can eat rice once in ten days.

My master eats rice three times every day.

[Kanagawa pref./ Machida, CD brochure: 90]

Here is a song in which a nursemaid complains of the master's mistreatment.

Being a nursemaid is a sad job.

Master scolds me, the baby cries at me.

People think this job is easy to do.

Master is always mean to me.

How can I love this child?

He/She is only the "seed" [source] of my meals.

Master pays me only with a cheap *obi* that is like a long worm,

When I finish the term of my service.

Even that, he hesitates to give.

Nennen'yo. Go to sleep.

[Tokushima pref./ *Folksongs, Folkplays, and Folkdances in Awa*¹²: 217]



A nursemaid with a broken umbrella. She is probably playing hide and seek with her friends. Drawing by Felix Regamey, published in *Promenades Japonaises* (1878), cited in *Bakumatsu Meiji no Seikatsu Fukei* (1995: 30).

The nursemaid points out that the master's and mistress' discrimination won't be good for their child.

If you love your child, you'd better love your nursemaid.

If you are cruel to the nursemaid, she will be cruel to your child.

Listen to me, Master. Listen to me, Mistress.

If you mistreat the nursemaid, she will mistreat your child.

[Mie pref./ Machida, vol. Kinki: 568]

The master and the mistress don't like the nursemaid.
 They make her wear ragged clothes and use a broken umbrella.
 Their child gets wet in the rain together with the nursemaid.
Natchirarin no shanto e

[Kyoto pref./ MKH, CD brochure:55]

Some nursemaids criticized their master and mistress saying that they are not good parents.

This child is spoiled. He/She is impossible.
 If you are parents, teach him/her some manners.

[Mie pref./ Hakushu:140]

When the baby cries, its parents get mad at the nursemaid. However, she knows that the baby cries because its mother does not take care of the baby well enough. So the nursemaid asks if the parents did not want the baby when it was born.

This baby cries all the time, cries all the time.
 Did its parents cry when they got it? *Yoi-yo.*

They didn't cry when they got this baby.
 The baby cries for Mama's breast. *Yoi-yo.*

[Mie pref./ MKH: 223]

The nursemaids were more afraid of the mistress than the master. In the next song, a nursemaid says this and how unreasonable her mistress is straightforwardly:

I'm more afraid of my mistress than my master.
 She glares hatefully and crossly at me with her black and white eyes.

The mistress of this house is very difficult.
 She tells me to cook rice with snow without melting the snow.

[Mie pref./ MKH: 222]

The fierce glare of the mistress appears in other songs also.

The hateful mistress and her sidelong glance,
I want to poke her eyeballs with a sharpened bamboo spear.

Fireflies shine in the vegetable field.

My mistress' eyes glare, *yoi-yoi*.

[Saitama pref./ Hakushu: 29]

The nursemaid tries to keep her pride by pointing out that the mistress was a nursemaid when she was young. The nursemaid ridicules the mistress in this way:

Look, she's feeling great wearing a black formal dress.
She herself was a nursemaid but now she calls me to serve her.

You call me a nursemaid, you look down on me,
But, look, you yourself were only a nursemaid.

[Mie pref./ Hakushu: 138]

The nursemaid is not only aggressive but also humorous when she reflects upon herself.

I get angry when they tell me I'm a fool;
But I'm not particularly wise, it's true.

[Mie pref./ Hakushu: 136]

The nursemaids hoped that the end of their obligatory work period would come as soon as possible. Naturally, they imagined repeatedly what it would be like when they leave, and made songs. In the next song a nursemaid says that she will insult the master and mistress when she no longer has to stay at the master's house. The song is in conversation form. I indicate the words for the nursemaid and for the response to them in the following quotations. The conversation form is effective in emphasizing the excitement of the nursemaid. Though there are two parts in this song, a nursemaid probably sang the song alone playing all the roles.

(The nursemaid):

After forty-nine days, I will give an ass to my master,
When I leave the house.

(Answer):

It isn't good to do such a thing to your master.
Thank him and leave.

(The nursemaid):

I wish I could thank him,
But the family has been so cruel to me, so I can't.

[Shiga pref./ MKH: 185]

The nursemaid expresses hatred straightforwardly in the next song.

(The nursemaid):

Good child, be quiet at least, if you don't go to sleep.
Snow falls. Trouble falls. The nursemaid is having a hard time.

(Answer):

You aren't having a hard time. This is a good child.
He/She doesn't fret or cry.

(The nursemaid):

You talk well. Go on. I don't care what you say.
I'm quitting on the twentieth of December.

(The nursemaid):

Remember what you have done to me. On the evening of the twentieth,
I will skin you and take the bones out of your body.

[Shimane pref./ MKH: 31]

While she says terrible things to her master and mistress in the imaginary scene of their parting, she wishes that they would appreciate her and ask her to come again.

I wish February would come right away.
 In February they get a new nursemaid and I'll be free.
 Thanks, master, for a long time.
 Mistress, look at me, and kiss my ass.
 Don't say such a thing and come again. [Mistress' comment]
 [Chiba pref./ Hakushu: 26]

I quit. Get another girl for your nursemaid.
 See if she is better than me.
 If you do so, you will know, and I'll be honored.
 [Mic pref./ Hakushu: 134]

Next are two more critical songs about the mistress. These songs are interesting because they are fused with geisha love songs. Geishas are professional female entertainers. They were well trained in playing musical instruments, singing songs, and dancing. They prostituted themselves but usually with one steady man if they were the first class geishas.¹³ Many nursemaids were forced to work in geisha houses when their parents could not afford to have them back home. The geisha love songs form an important part of Japanese folk music. I introduce two versions of "Hakata no komori uta".

This is Hakata willow town, but there are no willow trees.
 Instead, there are sexy prostitutes with hips that sway like willow branches. *Yoi, yoi.*

Listen to me, Mistress and Master.
 If you mistreat the nursemaid, she will mistreat your child.
 [Fukuoka pref./ Machida, vol. North Kyushu:16]

My mistress is a *gara-gara-gaki* [an astringent persimmon]
 She looks nice but is nasty.

I'm happy when I see you [lover], but it's harder to see you go after you come.
 We have to part, me and you.
 [Fukuoka pref./ Machida, vol. North Kushi:16]

The nursemaids expressed in songs their dissatisfaction about the basic condition of their life such as clothes, food, and work time. They also expressed resentment against discrimination. They criticized the master and mistress in many ways, warned them, and ridiculed their arrogance. They released their anger by singing songs in which they take revenge on the master and mistress. The songs helped them escape from the severe reality of their lives.

V Love for Singing

The child nursemaids' only skill for nursing babies was singing. Their songs may have soothed the baby sometimes, but not always.

This baby cries, cries all the time, and I know why.
This baby wants mama's breast instead of my songs.

[Hyogo pref./ Hakushu: 227]

Adults did not like songs of the nursemaids because the words were often too sad or rude for nursery songs. However, the nursemaids loved singing. They defended themselves saying,

I'm a nursemaid. What's wrong with my singing?
Are you bothered? Sorry, but be bothered.

[Mie pref./ Hakushu: 137]

They say singing is their job so they cannot be stopped.

From the west end to the east end
I go around singing songs.
Excuse me if I bother you.
But this is my job if you want to know.

[Osaka pref./ Hakushu: 220]

Hakushu cited numerous nursemaid songs that were fused with vulgar love songs.

They show that the nursemaids were on the way to adulthood. The songs are word games. The nursemaids learned the thrill of loving a man through songs before the real experience. They probably learned many other necessary things from songs.

A nursemaid who doesn't even know *i ro ka* [alphabet],
It's a wonder she has learned erotic pleasure not knowing when and where.
[Mie pref./ Hakushu: 144]

Autumn has come. Deer are calling each other.
Why don't the maple leaves put on red color?

Has autumn come? Deer are calling each other.
Why doesn't the nursemaid put on color * ?

[Mie pref./ Hakushu: 144]

* "color" [*i ro*] in Japanese also means "sex"(n.) or "erotic"(adj.).

I and you are good friends.
We always go everywhere together.

[Aichi pref./ Hakushu: 124]

The last passage among above quotations is humorous. When it is sung as a love song, it is not interesting or witty; however, when a young nursemaid girl sings it, the song expresses more than the original intention. Here, she humorously describes herself saying that she is always with a baby while others are possibly with their boyfriends. Singing songs probably helped the nursemaids to let their suppressed adolescent energy go¹⁴.

There are songs in which a nursemaid confesses her love of singing:

I like singing songs. I don't like chanting prayers.
When I die, I will be a part of the fields and mountains.

[Aichi pref./ Hakushu: 127]

Here she indicates that she is a part of nature and is more interested in the secular pleasure than another kinds of pleasure which some people experience in religious acti-

vities. Singing songs saved them from the burden of everyday life. A nursemaid says in another song,

I need to sing. I need to cheer up.
Or else I will be ill from melancholy.

Songs are good. They make me feel better.
They also comfort people. Songs are good.

[Mie pref./Hakushu: 146]

The nursemaids created a number of counting songs. When I found many counting songs like the song I quote below in anthologies, I was surprised at the playful spirit expressed in the alliterations. I realized that singing songs was a great pleasure to the nursemaids. This song describes the life of a nursemaid very well. One can find similar counting songs in almost any part of Japan.

<i>Shitotsu</i>	<i>shindoino</i>	<i>ga</i>	<i>komori</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>yagu</i>	<i>de</i>
Firstly	a terrible thing	is	baby-sitting	the job		and

<i>Nude</i>	<i>nukumarede</i>	<i>Sande</i>	<i>sagabarede</i>
Secondly	being hated	Thirdly	being sent for loudly

<i>Sude</i>	<i>sukkararede</i>	<i>Gode</i>	<i>goshagarede</i>
Fourth	being scolded at	Fifth	being gotten angry at

<i>Rokude</i>	<i>rokunamono</i>	<i>kasherarene</i>
Sixth	decent thing	not being offered to eat

<i>Suzude</i>	<i>suzugagi</i>	<i>obasharare</i>
Seventh	an unlovable kid	forced to carry on the back

<i>Hatzude</i>	<i>hadagarede</i>	<i>Kude</i>	<i>kudogarede</i>
Eighth	being hit	ninth	being preached at

<i>Tode</i>	<i>tokusa</i>	<i>ette</i>	<i>horogedo</i>	<i>yareda</i>
Tenth	far	go	rock the baby	I am told

Nenneko ya Onboko ya

(Go to sleep, little thing)

[Miyagi pref.: MKH, 175]

The counting song is a traditional style of nursery song. There is another traditional style which the nursemaid loved to use when they made their own nursery songs called "quarrel song." Quarrel songs are play songs. Two groups of children sang phrases alternatively and had a "quarrel," or rather communication in a song. The most famous is "a quarrel song in Ume," which was sung in Ume district, the northern part of Kyushu. The nursemaids got together with a baby on their backs and parted into two groups. The groups stood facing each other. Alternatively, group after group, they sang,

(A) *Nen-ne, nen-ne*, (Sleep, sleep,) a sleeping baby is lovable.

(B) A crying baby is ugly.

(A) If it's ugly, kick it into a rice paddy.

(B) If it climbs up, kick it again.

(A) Look at the girl. She has monkey eyes.

(B) She has an alligator mouth, and an Emma * face.

(A) Look at her. She has a sweet bean cake face.

(B) She might look better if she's dusted with sugar and soy bean powder.

[Ooita pref./ Machida, vol. North Kyushu: 319]

* Emma: King of the Buddhist Hell and Judge of souls. He is believed to have a fierce face.

As one can see above, in quarrel songs there is not really a "quarrel." While singing the singers correspond with each other and reveal that they share the same feelings. The "quarrel song of Ume" continues as follows after several phrases. The chains of words help express nursemaids' emotion.

(A) I see the mountains. I can't see my home.

(B) It's hard to get home. I hate the mountains.

(A)If possible, I would exchange the mountain

(B)With my home.

(A)I sing, but I don't particularly like singing.

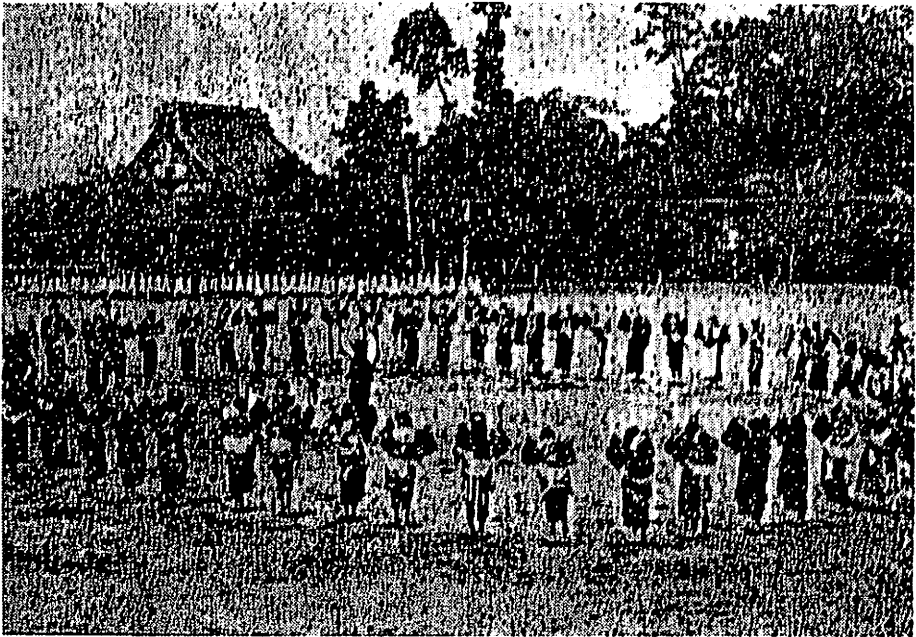
(B)I sing, instead of crying because of pain.

(A)Because of pain, I go out to see the mountain.

(B)All the mountains are covered with snow.

["A quarrel song of Ume" Ooita pref./ Machida, vol. North Kyushu: 319]

Here, we notice that this song shares some phrases with different nursemaid songs from different areas. Nursemaid songs traveled with people. The feeling of those who suffered from poverty, discrimination, and loneliness moved people who understood the pain. Thus, nursemaid songs became an important part of Japanese culture.



Dancing nursemaids on Sports Day. KOZU Zenzaburo published this photograph (property of Shiroyama Elementary School in Nagano prefecture) in his *Kyoku Aishi* (1947: 153).

The nursemaids could express themselves straightforwardly in songs, because they were free from the eyes and ears of the mistresses and the masters during the daytime. They consoled themselves, criticized adults, released their anger, and felt a little better by singing. The beauty of these nursemaid songs lies in simplicity, straightforwardness, and the feeling of joy of singing in contrast with their miserable life. The prewar Japanese government, however, took it gravely that young women sang such sad or crude songs. A Nagano prefecture government report written in 1883 says:

It is a great shame that nursemaids do not go to school and spend time in shrines, temples and on the streets all day in groups. Their only obligation is to prevent the babies from crying. They sing disgraceful vulgar songs, give trouble to coaches and horses, scorn passersby, etc. Their behavior is rude and rough, and their language is too impolite.¹⁵

Elementary school teachers urged parents to send their children to school instead of making them work, but were not very successful. Since the parents could not even feed all of their children, this was somewhat unrealistic advice. In the end, schools compromised and started accepting nursemaids with the babies on their backs. A report says that they first called their teacher "Master," and the relationship between the nursemaid students and their teachers became like the one between the nursemaids and their masters. The teacher gave them commands and they obeyed.¹⁶ They learned subjects while standing or sitting on the desk because a baby was tied on their backs.¹⁷ On Sports Day they danced with a baby on their backs.¹⁸

In school, children were taught new songs that the government thought were good for young people. However, the school songs did not take with the nursemaids. They kept singing their own nursery songs when school was out. The tremendous number of nursemaid songs proves that their own songs were so much a part of their life. Although such nursemaids probably existed only in Japan, their sadness, anger and joy of singing expressed in their songs share themes that are universal in folksongs sung by oppressed people in various societies throughout the world.

Notes

1. A summary of this essay was presented at the American Folklore Society 1995 Annual Meeting (Lafayette, Louisiana). The research on which this essay is based was made with the support of Ritsumeikan University Research Fund.
2. According to a report cited in the Asahi Shinbun [Newspaper] on February 19, 1995, one of Japan's biggest bedclothes companies, Nishikawa, sent out a questionnaire to four thousand and some people asking, "What is your favorite lullaby?" The result was, (1)"Itsuki no komori uta"(30% and above), (2)"A lullaby by F. Schubert/ op.49 no.4"(13.3%), (3)"A lullaby by J. Brahms/ D498, op.98 no.2"(11.5%). The report also notes that especially men like "Itsuki no komori uta"; over 40% of the men voted for this song. "Itsuki no komori uta" became widely known when NHK [Japan Broadcast Association] broadcasted it throughout Japan in a Japanese folksong program in 1949. Since then the song has been arranged in many different ways and used in radio programs and movies. It drew attention to nursemaid songs, but gave the listeners a one-sided image of nursemaids being always sad and obedient.
3. All English translations from Japanese texts cited in this essay are mine.
4. Machida: Collected and edited by MACHIDA Kasho, *Nihon Min'yo Taikan*, 9 vols. (1944-1980: Tokyo: Nihon Hoso Kyokai [Japan Broadcast Association], rpt., 1994). The volumes are not numbered, but specified with the area that the volume deals with. The page numbers in the text are of the reprint edition. Machida (1888-1981) was the greatest folksong collector in modern Japan.
5. There were a few boy nursemaids. I quoted some songs that refer to boy nursemaids in chapter III.
6. *Off Course Live in Concert*, Toshiba-EMI, TOCT-8207, 1974.
7. Hakushu: Edited by KITAHARA Hakushu, *Nihon Densho Doyo Shusei, vol. 1: Lullabies*, 5 vols. (1947: rpt., Tokyo: Sanseido, 1974). Hakushu (1885-1942) (Japanese usually call him by his first name) was a leading poet and nursery song writer before WW II. He edited this five-volume traditional children's song anthology with the help of many folklorists and published folksong books. Hakushu was not a field folklorist himself while Machida was. It took him and his assistant editors 20 years to complete the volumes. Hakushu died before their publication.
8. TAKAYAMA Sumiko, *Nono-san ni narunndayo: Mann-mo kaitaku no naraku no soko kara* [*You'll Become a Little Buddha : From the Hell of the Frontier Life in Manchuria*] (Tokyo: Nihon Tosho Center, 1992)12-14.
9. MKH: *Min'yo Kinkyuchosa Hokokusho* [*Report of an Urgent Folksong Research*] This research was made in every prefecture with a government grant. Each prefecture published an official report.

MKH/CD: a CD that was issued by the prefecture Education Office to accompany the MKH report.

10. MASUDA Sayo, "Geisha," *Gendai Kyōyo Zenshu vol.11 : Nihon no Jyōsei [Japanese Women]* (Tokyo: Chikuma, 1959)139.
11. Masuda, 139.
12. Tokushima-ken Minzokugeino Chosakai [The traditional popular entertainment research group of Tokushima prefecture], *Awa no Min'yo to Minzokugeino [Folksongs, Folkplays, and Folkdances in Awa]* (Tokushima-shi: 1972).
13. Masuda, 161.
14. Smith and Wiswell have a report on Japanese children's playing, singing and joking in which strong sexual references were made. (1982: *The Women of Suyē Mura* 70-71.) Ella Wiswell (Embree) wrote the journal in 1935 in Kumamoto prefecture, Kyushu.

"Little boys playing out of doors will occasionally show signs of exhibitionism. They pull up their kimono and strut about sticking their penises forward, sometimes humming a tune or singing an especially racy verse of a song they heard at a party. The Ouchi youngster [the older boy of the scene above] runs around with his hand on his penis all the time. He is one of the three or four boys agiven to this habit, and likes to run up to another boy and thrust his hand into the folds of the other's kimono."

There was, not surprisingly, sexual joking among the children as well. "After a while the little nursemaids began to ask riddles. 'What is this?' asked Yaeko. 'Only six inches long. Not used in daylight. Used at night. White liquid comes out. (Go sun bak-kari. Hiru tamenaran. Ban ni tamenaru. Shiroy shiru deru mono.)' Before she got half-way through Fumie began jumping around and yelling, 'It's that! (Sono koto da!)' Yaeko, after a few moments' excitement, said, 'It's a candle – there! (Rosoku desu – hora).' Then Fumie went over to her and whispered what she thought it was. 'Well!' said Yaeko, 'Fumie thought it was a penis!' There was much laughter."

15. KOZU Zenzaburo, *Kyōiku Aishi: Komori, Kōjō, Handama no Gakko [A Sad History of Education: Schools for Child Nursemaids, Young Woman Factory Workers, and Apprentice Geishas]* (Nagano, Japan: Ginga-shobo, 1974) 114-115.
16. Kozu, 140.
17. Kozu, 133.
18. Kozu, 153.

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