

The carrying of infants in Japan. Alan Macfarlane

The infants seem to have been carried to the fields where their mothers worked, either by the mother or another. Morse wrote that 'Little children are never left alone in the house, but are tied to the back of the mother or one of the older children and have delightful rides, fresh air, and see everything that is going on.'¹ He noted: I have never yet seen a cradle, nor have I seen a baby left alone to squall its eyes out; indeed, it is the rarest sound in Japan - a baby's cry.'² Infants, he said, were 'forever riding on their mother's back or somebody's else back.'³ His most detailed description shows us that the infants were carried by both their mothers and older siblings, and that they were taken to where their mothers were working and then kept on the back. He noticed on his arrival the work in the rice fields where 'the whole family join in the work, old women as well as the children. The smaller children seem to be in attendance as spectators, carrying on their backs the babies. This carrying of babies on the backs one sees everywhere. It is a remarkable sight to see four women out of five, and five children out of six, lugging babies upon their backs, oftentimes held in place by the hands of the holder crossed behind, or the child riding with its legs astride the carrier.'⁴

Alice Bacon described the institution thus. 'Babies of the lower classes, within a few weeks after birth, are carried about tied upon the back of some member of the family, frequently an older sister or brother, who is sometimes not more than five or six years old.'⁵ She noted that 'The poorer the family, the earlier is the young baby thus put on someone's back, and one frequently sees babies not more than a month old, with bobbing heads and blinking eyes, tied by long bands of cloth to the backs of older brothers or sisters, and living in the streets in all weathers.'⁶ The carrying was not just done by mothers and older siblings. Alcock wrote that 'It is a very common sight, in the streets and shops of Yeddo, to see a little nude Cupid in the arms of a stalward-looking father, nearly as naked, who walks about with his small burthen, evidently handling it with all the gentleness and dexterity of a practised hand.'⁷ Alcock illustrates the costume of the 'paternal nurse'. Morse provides little sketches of a large boy fishing, with a baby strapped to his back and of an old man sweeping the road with a baby on his back.⁸

The way in which the baby was carried is described by Alcock, as well as the duration of this practice. 'Children and dogs abound everywhere. Until the former can walk, they are generally secured to the back of the mother, so that, while these pursue their daily occupations, their arms are left free.

¹ Morse, i, p.351

² Morse, i, p.115

³ Morse, i, p.41

⁴ Morse, i, p.10

⁵Bacon, Japanese Girls, 6

⁶Bacon, Japanese Girls, 6

⁷ Alcock, Tycoon, 1, p.122

⁸ Morse, i, 115,153

Unfortunately (so it seems to the looker-on) the poor babe's head is left equally free, the body only being supported by the sort of pocket in which the body is deposited; and consequently, with every movement of the parental trunk, it rolls from side to side, swaying to and fro, as if a dislocation of the neck must inevitably be the result.⁹ In fact, the babies seem to have adapted very well. As another observer noted, 'One striking characteristic of the Japanese baby is, that at a very early age it learns to cling like a kitten to the back of whoever carries it, so that it is really difficult to drop it through carelessness, for the baby looks out for its own safety like a young monkey...'¹⁰ This year or so of carrying may indirectly have contributed to infant health in another way as well as affording protection from accidents and dirt. Dubos notes generally of animals that 'Handling during early life even increases general resistance to various forms of stress, for example, to prolonged deprivation of food and water, to cold exposure, and to immobilization.'¹¹ The symbolic importance of the practice is shown in the treatment of the Emperor's children. Mrs. Bacon described how 'Imperial babies are held in the arms of someone night and day, from the moment of birth until they have learned to walk.'¹² The duration, until they can walk, or at least stand, is also attested to by Griffis. 'The mother bears the bairns, but the children carry them. Each preceding child, as it grows older, must lug the succeeding baby on its back till able to stand.'¹³

An interesting description of the continuing tradition in a farming community in the 1950s brings out a number of other points. It shows the ability of the infant to deal with body movement, the psychological and perhaps physical benefits, the feeding on demand, and infants sharing their mother's bed. The child spends 'much time in the arms of mother and grandmother and even more lashed close to the back of one or the other by a long strip of cloth. Though the outside observer may wait with bated breath for the bobbing head of a sleeping infant to snap its slender neck at the next jerky movement of his busy mother, the sensation of being carried on the back, recalled by persons when they muse on their infancy, is not one of discomfort but of warmth and pleasurable accommodation to the rhythm of bodily movement...the father shares his quilts not only with his wife but with the nursing infant who sleeps with them. Eisaku receives attention whenever he cries...When crying begins, someone picks the baby up, and soon the breast is offered.' Some of the reasons put forward for the practice are also indicated. Infants 'spend much of their waking and sleeping hours lashed on someone's back as a precaution against their falling from the edge of the raised floor to the ground in a moment of inattention. At the same time, if the child is being carried, he is unable to damage the paper panels or other parts of the fragile house. Another spot considered dangerous within the house is the toilet, which, opening at floor level, offers no barrier to the inquisitive crawler who might fall through.'¹⁴ These reasons may be true, but there must be others as well, since children in almost all societies face similar dangers, yet are usually not carried around to this extent.

⁹ Alcock, Tycoon, 1, p.121-22

¹⁰ Tames (ed. Encounters, p.52-3

¹¹ Dubos, Adapting, p.16-17

¹² Tames (ed), Encounters, p.52

¹³ Griffis, Mikado, p.356

¹⁴ Beardsley, Village, p.292-3

Since all of this carrying added an immense amount of work for mothers and others it would be useful to know why and how the custom arose. There may have been an element of fear of uncleanness and danger. Some believe that putting babies on the ground is avoided, because it is thought that the soil is dirty and dangerous. The ground is cold - perhaps an idea of the opposition of hot and cold.¹⁵ Yet, if there were other siblings or an aged grandparent to mind the baby, one wonders why they were not left at home. Again, the solution may lie in the immense amount of work to be done. Perhaps the grand-parents were also out in the fields. Possibly, the Japanese could not afford to let anyone rest. As soon as a child was old enough to do so, it would be lifting other babies.

(supplementary)

Another consequence may have been to reduce infant mortality through accidents and contact with sources of infection. It would also certainly have an effect, as Morse, noted, on the Japanese temperament, providing an entirely different kind of warm security than the tight swaddling practiced in many cultures.¹⁶ As Singer describes the institution, 'For years the child is carried on the back of the mother, strapped or carried in a pouch-like fold of her padded over-garment, sharing in a half-drowsy state her warmth and her rhythm, robbed of free movement of his limbs but feeling sheltered and close to the maternal body which to him means life, protection, company and goodness.'¹⁷ An entirely different effect is suggested by Alice Bacon; 'this clinging with arms and legs is, perhaps, a valuable part of the training which gives to the whole nation the peculiar quickness of motion and hardness of muscle that characterize them from childhood.'¹⁸ Whatever the consequences, it is certain that 'Mother and babe are rarely separated, night or day, during the first few years of the baby's life...'¹⁹

¹⁵ Namahira, Personal communication

¹⁶ cf Takeo Doi, Dependency

¹⁷ Singer, *Sword and Jewel*, 35

¹⁸ Bacon, *Japanese Girls*, 11

¹⁹ Bacon, *Japanese Girls*, 86/87