[Japan Society-New York: Documents Project. 1890-1930, Foreign Relations)]

**Document 42: "I hated my grandmother and aunt out of a sense of pure justice." "My Life in Korea," Kaneko Fumiko, 1926.**

[These Japanese residents of Bugang] had originally come here to make money. There was no community spirit as such binding them together. Money was everything. People with money had power; and this lot in effect ran the village These people with money and leisure, who dressed in styles that had been the fashion a few seasons back in Japan, were the class that threw their weight around.

The most powerful members of this class had, in addition to money, fields and paddy land that constituted the main source of their income. Next in importance were the military police, station master, doctor, and school teachers. Their womenfolk were respectfully called *okusan*, while the wives of those below them, the traders, farmers, laborers, and carpenter, were all called *okamisan*. . . .

If any big event occurred, the people held a torchlight or masquerade procession. Occasionally they would set up a hut in a vacant lot on elevated land where they would dance, play instruments, sing, and do renditions of plays. . . . Customs like these are just what you would expect to find in a new colony. They provided a means for the men and women to have a little fun and broke the monotony. This entertainment, however, was only for those who belonged to the first class; the people of the second class were mere passive onlookers. . . .

In writing of this period in my life, I must say something about the male servant, Kō. Although not a very bright man, Kō was honest, straightforward, and an unusually hard worker.

He never tried to get out of work, nor was he the kind of man who could have pocketed, even inadvertently, anything that belonged to his master.

Kō had a wife and three children. His eldest daughter was pretty, and a man had offered to buy her for three *to* of unpolished rice. My grandmother, however, told Kō not to sell her. If he waited until the girl was twelve or thirteen, she said, he could get one hundred yen for her. Although Kō was desperate, he deferred to my grandmother and went on feeding the girls.

Kō was paid around nine yen a month, which was two or three yen lower than the going wage. This arrangement did not last long, however. My grandmother figured that she could make out even better if she paid him partly in rice instead of cash. She gave him some excuse and started paying him two yen of his salary in rice, and very poor quality rice at that. . . .

Kō was thus extremely poor. No one in his house had enough to eat, and in the cold of winter his children shivered in hemp rice bags. Even Kō himself, the mainstay of the family, literally owned only the clothes on his back. My grandmother was always getting after him, in fact, about how dirty they were, and how she could not have him disgracing the family. One bitterly cold winter evening, Kō, standing outside, had the following conversation through the closed sliding doors with my grandmother inside.

"Ma'am, I apologize for asking, but I wonder if I could have the day off tomorrow. There is something that I really have to do."

Grandmother, who was ensconced in the warm kotatsu, lit into him. "What! Just like that" 'Gimme the day off.' You too, eh? Want to see how much you can get away with. Well, you just keep it up and see what happens."

"Oh, no. It's not that at all. I really can't come tomorrow."

"Is that so?" Well, why not? Expecting your rich relatives from Seoul?" Grandmother and Aunt looked at each other and had a good snigger over this little joke.

"No, it's not that. You see," Kō answered, acutely embarrassed, "it's the washing. . . ."

"Washing? Well, if it's only washing, there's no reason you have to do it. That's what your wife is for, isn't it? Talk about spoiling a woman!"

What a contrast: the maliciousness of the two inside and the misery of the poor soul outside! Though I was only a child—no, precisely because I was a child—I hated my grandmother and aunt out of a sense of pure justice more at that moment than I ever have in my whole life."

"It's not that I'm easy on my wife, Ma'am. You see, I have only this one set of clothes; so while my wife is washing them and drying them over the fire, and putting the padding back in and sewing them up again, the only way I can keep warm is to stay under the quilt."

The two of them guffawed. Then—perish the thought that they should give the man something else to put on—they simply granted his request.

Kō was a hard worker, but he was doomed to poverty. He had once been about to quit, figuring that if he went back to the railroad construction job that he had before, he could make seventeen or eighteen yen; but Grandmother would not let him go. She persuaded him that even if he did make seventeen yen, or even eighteen yen, the work was not as good as what he was doing for her. And besides, she said, he should take into account all of the largess that fell his way in her employ.

"You've got to remember that you're getting your lodging free; and when you're really pressed, we give you an advance on your wages. Even when you borrow money, you only have

to pay the usual market interest of 70 percent. And though it may be small, we're renting you a garden patch, and your pots and pans and things. . . ."

The weak Kō, though knowing full well that he would actually be better off working on the railroad, could not bring himself to quit and was thus stuck with his suffering.

**Source:** Kaneko Fumiko. *The Prison Memoirs of a Japanese Woman*. Mikiso Hane, trans. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe East Gate Book, 1991, 57-59, 73-75.

**Context.**

In 1912, when the nine-year-old Kaneko Fumiko was sent to reside with her grandparents—business people living in Korea—that country had been a Japanese colony for two years. The seven years that she lived with them radicalized her, eventually landing her in prison as one of Japan's early anarchists. A bright and sensitive child, as is clear in this memoir, Fumiko gained not only a clear understanding of the ways in which villages organized themselves but a strong sense of the injustice inherent in colonial societies, particularly as she watched her family abuse their Korean servant Kō. Her family's snobbery and nastiness may have been extreme, but it represented accurately the attitudes many of the hundreds of thousands of Japanese felt toward the Koreans among whom they lived. From 1910 to 1945, Japan controlled every aspect of Korean life: its schools, its economy, its religious institutions, and its police forces.

**Questions.**

1. Assuming yourself to be an anthropologist, how would you diagram the Japanese community of the village in which Kaneko Fumiko lived? Think in terms of both occupations and class structures.

2. Why do you think Kō was co compliant?

3. What about colonialism might encourage the condescending behaviour of families like Kaneko Fumiko's.

**Terms.**

*Bugang*. A village in South Korea, between Seoul and Pusan, where Kameko Fumiko's grandparents had come as immigrants.

*Okusan, okamisan*. Both are suffixes used to address Japanese wives; in this colonial society, the latter was considered inferior to the former.

*Buying Kō's daughter*. Kaneko is describing here what was in effect a traditional Korean marriage proposal, with a family offering to pay 3 *to* (over 14 gallons) of rice as the marriage price.

*Kotatsu*. A footwarmer, placed under a quilt-covered table. Kotatsu were widely used in Japanese homes to keep warm in the cold seasons.