The Gholāms of Safavid Dynasty: The Case of Georgian Origin

by Hirotake Maeda

This paper sets out to investigate the historical character of the gholām-e khāṣe-ye sharife (personal servants of the Shāh) of Safavid dynasty. To achieve the aim, the activities of four powerful gholām families of Georgian origin are analyzed. Special attention is paid to the descriptions in the original sources written in Georgian and Armenian language as well as Persian and European languages.

The first part of the paper treats the problem of their origin and the early relations with the Safavid court. In the second part, the character of their activities at the royal court is revealed based on the tables where the activities of each gholām, belonging to four families, are inserted. In the third part, giving the four family trees, the important role of family bonds is discussed.

Their origins prove to be Saakaze family, Barat’ashvili family, the family of Somkhiti’i’s Melik (Mirimanidze), and Undiladze family. All these families were from powerful landlords of the K’art’li Kingdom of Georgia. They are considered to have started their services at the royal court of the Safavid dynasty before the ascension of Shāh ‘Abbās I. They occupied the influential posts at the court, then, using their strong military character and family ties, advanced to the posts such as beglarbegi of large provinces. In short, the special role of Georgian gholāms as a military-administrative elite from K’art’li Kingdom is clearly observed.

They served the Safavids based on their kin relationship, thus brothers and sons acted often as deputy of their elders. Their sources of power existed not only in the strong ties of these family bonds but also in the historical process between Safavid dynasty and K’art’li Kingdom.

The result of this paper presents a new image of gholām of
Safavids. Furthermore, this example gives an interesting model of construction and establishment of the central authority through the introduction of new elite group from a specific layer of a certain region, closely and historically connected with the ruling power.