

Katsugoro (reincarnation case)

The nineteenth-century Japanese case of Katsugoro is one of the best documented classical cases of the reincarnation type. When he was eight, Katsugoro started to tell his family about having lived before in a nearby village as a boy named Tozo who had died five years before he was born. Many of his statements were verified and when he was taken to the village, he convinced Tozo's parents that in fact he was their son reborn. This is one of the cases that inspired Ian Stevenson to begin research on reincarnation phenomena in the 1960s.

Sources of Information

Although recorded more than two hundred years ago, the authenticity of KOYATA Katsugoro's story is hardly disputable, as there are three highly reliable documents corroborating his memory claims. (Note that in accordance with Japanese practice, Katsugoro's surname precedes his given name. By convention, the surname is written in capital letters, a practice that will be followed throughout this article.)

Investigation by a Retired Feudal Lord

In February 1823, IKEDA Kanzan, a retired daimyo (feudal lord) and a renowned man of literature and a scholar, visited Katsugoro's house to listen to his story. The visit of the retired daimyo greatly intimidated Katsugoro, an eight-year-old boy of a farmer, and made him speechless. Therefore, his grandmother Tsuya narrated the story of Katsugoro to Kanzan, who published Tsuya's narrative in March of that year as *Katsugoro Saisei Zensei Banashi (Past-Life Story of Katsugoro)*.^[1]

Investigation by an Upper Vassal

As a result of Ikeda's publication and word of mouth, it was not long before Katsugoro's story became widely known. An upper vassal (a high-ranking samurai, or hatamoto) named OKADO Denhachiro, who was in charge of the land where Katsugoro lived, investigated the case and submitted an official report to his superior.^[2] The report offers detailed information on the two families, Katsugoro's past-life memory claims, and the origins of the story. To a samurai like OKADO, loyalty to his superior was highly valued and the report can be regarded as a highly reliable source of the story.

Investigation by HIRATA Atsutane

A Japanese scholar, HIRATA Atsutane, one of the Four Great Men of Kokugaku studies (Japanese philological and philosophical studies), learned about Katsugoro, and in April of 1823 he called Katsugoro and his father Genzo to his private school and interviewed them. (Katsugoro came to the school on 22nd, 23rd, and 25th of April, and Genzo on 22nd and 25th). Compiling Katsugoro's narratives and adding his scholarly observations, he published *Katsugoro Saisei Kibun (Record of the Rebirth Story of Katsugoro)* in June of that year.^[3]

The Story Spreads

Writers and scholars of the period became aware of the story, and at least nine significant works reprinted (sometimes with modifications) or recounted one or more of the three sources of Katsugoro's narrative.^[4] Another book, *Chinsetsu Shuki (Collection of Strange Stories)*, fell into the hands of Lafcadio Hearn via a friend and was translated into English and published in 1897.^[5] The

main information source translated by Hearn appears to be the book written by IKEDA Kanzan. It was Hearn's translation that Ian Stevenson included in his 1960 review of past-life memory claims.^[6]

How Katsugoro Came to Relate His Memories

Katsugoro was born on 10 October 1815 in Nakano village (the present-day Higashi Nakano, located about 34 kilometers west of Tokyo), the second son of a farmer named Genzo. His mother was named Sei and his grandmother, Tsuya.^[7]

When Katsugoro was eight years old, as he was playing with his elder brother, Otojiro, and elder sister, Fusa, in the rice-field, he said: 'Brother, where did you come from before you were born to our house?'

Otojiro said: 'I don't know such things.'

Katsugoro asked his sister the same question. Fusa ridiculed Katsugoro, saying: 'How can I know where I had been before I was born? Why do you ask such a stupid question?'

Puzzled by her reaction, Katsugoro asked: 'You mean you don't know where you came from before you were born?'

'Then, do you know where you came from before you were born?' asked Fusa.

'I know very well. I used to be a son of Kyubei, named Tozo,' replied Katsugoro.

'That's weird. I'll tell father and mother about it,' said Fusa.

Katsugoro immediately apologized, crying: 'Don't tell father and mother about it!'

'Then I won't tell. But the next time you behave naughtily and do not listen to me, I will tell,' replied Fusa.

After that day, whenever they quarrelled, Fusa would threaten Katsugoro, saying: 'OK, I'll tell father and mother,' which immediately made him yield to his sister.

One day their parents, Genzo and Sei, noticed such an exchange and asked Fusa to tell them about the matter. Fusa would not talk, and they were worried, thinking Katsugoro must have been doing something wrong. They asked again and forced Fusa to reveal the truth.

Hearing Fusa's story, Genzo, Sei, and the grandmother, Tsuya, thought it very strange, and they coerced Katsugoro into talking about his story. Reluctantly, he told them, 'I was a child of Kyubei in Hodokubo village, and my mother was named Oshizu.^[8] When I was small, Kyubei died, and in his place came a man named Hanshiro. He loved me very much, but I died when I was six. Later I entered mother's womb and was born again.'

Since it was such a strange story told by a child, they did not take it seriously at the time.

Now, Sei had to suckle her four-year-old daughter,^[9] so Katsugoro slept with Tsuya. One night, he asked her: 'Please take me to Hodokubo village, where Hanshiro lives. I want to see my parents there.' Thinking it strange, Tsuya did not take Katsugoro's request seriously, but from that night on, Katsugoro made the same request night after night. Therefore, Tsuya persuaded him to talk about his story. Katsugoro recalled what he remembered in detail and asked her never to tell his story to anyone except his father and mother.

Katsugoro said: 'Until I was around four, I remembered my past-life in detail, but now I have

forgotten many things. I didn't have to die, but I died because I didn't take medicine. (He had not known that the cause of his death was smallpox. He said he became aware of it because someone told him so. Kozo's date of death was 4 February 1810.)

Katsugoro's Intermission Memories

Katsugoro gave the following account of what happened after Tozo's death.^[10]

When I expired, I felt no agony. After that, however, it was a little agonizing for a while, and then the agony was completely over. When my body was pushed hard into a coffin, I (my soul) popped up and stayed aside. When people brought the coffin to a hill to bury it, I was on the white cloth covering it. When they dropped the coffin into the grave hole, it made a loud sound. It resonated in my mind, and I still remember it well. Monks were reading a sutra, but it got me nowhere. I thought they were only thinking about how to steal money, detestable fellows.^[11] So, I came back home and stayed on a desk. I talked to other people, but they made no response. Then, an old man appeared with long white hair wearing a black kimono, saying, 'Come here.' I followed, going up to a place which I didn't know where it was. Then, I was in a beautiful field and played. Flowers were in full bloom, and when I tried to break off a twig, a small crow appeared and threatened me greatly. When I recall this, I still feel scared. ('It must have been the guardian deity of Nakano village,' said Genzo, and added, 'I came up with the idea when Katsugoro said that the bird appeared.')^[12]

As I was playing around, I heard my parents and others talking in my house. I also heard monks reading a sutra, but as I said, I just thought they were detestable. Though I couldn't eat the hot, steaming food they offered, I was able to enjoy the smell. During the ceremony for the dead in July, I went home and saw that dumplings were offered. I was hanging around like this for a while. Then, one day, when we were walking down a street in front of the house (it is the house of Genzo), the old man pointed to this house and said 'Born to that house.' Following his words, I parted from the old man and stayed under a persimmon tree in the yard. After watching the house for three days, I went into it through a window and remained at the wood-burning stove for another three days. I heard my mother talking with my father about leaving alone and going to a faraway place.

Katsugoro's father Genzo commented:

It was at the time of new year, about ten months before Katsugoro was born. One night, my wife and I talked and decided that since we were in such poor condition with my mother and two children to support, my wife would go to Edo, the capital city to work from the coming March. At that time, we didn't reveal our decision to my mother, but in February, we talked about it to her, and in March, she went to Edo. However, when she realized she was pregnant, she took leave and came back. She must have conceived at the time of the new year, and after 10 months, Katsugoro was born. It is unbelievable that Katsugoro talked about this because it was the story just between us. At the time of the pregnancy and after that, I don't remember any strange things happened.

Katsugoro concluded:

Then, I went into my mother's belly, I think, but I don't remember very well. However, I do remember that I shifted my position when I thought I was giving pain to her (six years after Tozo's death in Hodokubo village in 1810). I had no trouble when I was born. I had remembered everything until I reached four or five, but then, I began to forget gradually.^[13]

Verification of Katsugoro's Past-Life Memories

FORMATION OF KATSUGORO'S FIRST LIFE MEMORIES

Tsuya thought Katsugoro's story increasingly strange. When she went to a particular spot where old ladies gathered, she asked: 'Do any of you know someone named Kyubei living in Hodokubo village?'

One of them said: 'I don't know, but I have some connections in the village. I could ask about that person. But why do you want to know about him?'

Tsuya was unable to remain silent and talked about Katsugoro's story.

Then, on 7 January, an old man from Hodokubo village came and said:

I know Hanshiro of Hodokubo village very well. Kyubei was the name of the person who later came to be called as Togoro. However, he died 15 years ago, and nobody knows a person named Kyubei. The second husband of Kyubei's wife is called Hanshiro. I recently heard about a child who claimed to have been the child of Kyubei, named Tozo, who died at the age of six and was born in this house. The child's story matches the facts greatly, so they were curious and wanted to know more about it and decided to send me here.

Katsugoro's parents and grandmother told him what Katsugoro had said. Puzzled, they parted, and the old man went back to Hodokubo village. Now many people became aware of Katsugoro's story and came to see Katsugoro. When Katsugoro came out of the house, they teased him, calling him, 'Hodokubo kid'. Feeling embarrassed, Katsugoro isolated at home. 'That's why I said not to tell anybody about my story. Things have become like this because you spoke about it,' complained Katsugoro to his parents.

After a while, Katsugoro's desire to return to Hanshiro's home grew stronger and stronger. He even cried all night, begging Tsuya to take him there, but when asked in the morning about it, he said he didn't remember. These scenes happened every night until the grandmother said to Genzo: 'Katsugoro's desire to go to the place where Hanshiro lives is really strong. What he is saying will not be true, but I think I would like to take him to Hodokubo village. It would be inconsiderate for a man to do so, but for an old woman, it will be okay even if ridiculed.'

Genzo agreed, and on 20 January, Tsuya took Katsugoro to Hodokubo village, about 5.9 kilometers from Nakano village, beyond a mountain.

To Tsuya's words, 'Is this the house? Is that it?', Katsugoro replied, "Not yet. Not yet", and led the way.

At last he announced, 'This is the house.' He entered, Tsuya following. (Katsugoro had said that Hanshiro's house was in the middle of three houses, which was correct.) Tsuya asked the people living there about the house owner's name. 'Hanshiro' was the answer. When asked the name of his wife, 'Shizu [Oshizu]' was the answer. Although Hanshiro and Shizu had heard the story before, hearing it from Tsuya made them feel even stranger and sadder. They both shed tears. They held Katsugoro, gave a long look at his face, and said repeatedly: 'You do look like Tozo when he was six.'

While being held, Katsugoro pointed to the roof of a tobacco shop opposite Hanshiro's house, saying, 'That roof was not there before. That tree was not there, either.' All this was true, which deeply surprised everyone even more. Hanshiro's relatives came to see Katsugoro, and one of them was the nursing mother of the younger sister of Kyubei. She said, 'This boy even looks like Kyubei,' and broke down in tears,

Katsugoro and Tsuya came back to Nakano village on that day, but after that Katsugoro repeatedly said, 'I want to go back to Hodokubo village. I want to visit the grave of Kyubei.' Genzo turned a deaf

ear to Katsugoro's begging, but on 27 January, Hanshiro came to Genzo's house to greet him. He asked Katsugoro if he would like to go to Hodokubo village, which delighted Katsugoro, as he wanted to visit the grave of Kyubei. He went to Hodokubo village with Hanshiro and came back in the evening.

Then, Katsugoro asked Genzo to take him to Hodokubo village and ask them to become relatives.^[14] 'I agreed, and while I was thinking about when to do so, I was called by the officer' [the upper vassal, OKADO Denhachiro, who wrote the official report to his superior], said Genzo.

Katsugoro's Attitude Towards Death

Katsugoro's attitude toward death was remarkable. Genzo recounted it in the following way:

Since he was born, Katsugoro has not been afraid of ghosts and evil spirits. I took care of a man named Genhichi, who was mentally ill, building a hut for him to live in. While approaching death, his look became horrible. Katsugoro's siblings would not go near the hut. But Katsugoro said, 'He is dying. I feel sorry for him. Please prepare enough medicine and food for him. I will bring them to him anytime,' and did so even late at night. After he died, his siblings were afraid to even go to the toilet (in Japan, historically, the toilets were in the yard), but Katsugoro said, 'Why are you afraid of the dead?' and showed no sign of fear.

He also said, 'I'm not afraid of my death, either.' When asked why, he replied, 'I realized I was dead because other people said so. At the time of my death, I didn't see my body, and I didn't think I was dead. The moment of death was not as agonizing as it may have appeared to others. After I died, I didn't become hungry, didn't feel hot nor cold. It was not very dark, even at night. No matter how long I walked, I didn't get tired. When I was with the old man, I was afraid of nothing. People say I was born after six years, but I felt it was just a short time.'

He also said, 'Mitake-sama [the name of a god] told me that "You don't have to be afraid of death."' I asked, 'Where did you see Mitake-sama?', but he didn't answer the question.^[15]

Katsugoro's Personality

In his report, HIRATA Atsutane described Katsugoro as follows: 'He doesn't look like a grown-up at all and likes boisterous play. He looks more clever than other peasant children. As I heard from Mr. Tani [HIRATA's friend], he likes courageous deeds and showed desire to be a samurai.'^[16]

In an essay titled, *Kassiyawa*, the author, MATSUURA Seizan, a feudal lord, reported a story where Katsugoro came to the house next door. He sent someone to see him, who reported back that 'He looked sullen. His red hair was close-cropped. He has a long face, is rather slender, and dark-skinned. But he was decent-looking and looked like a clever, smart kid'.^[17]

He was an ordinary kid, though intelligent. As the farmer's son, he appeared unlikely to fabricate a complicated past-life story.

Katsugoro's Later Development

In Hino City, in which Hodokubo village was located, the story of Katsugoro lingered for a long time. In 2006, a research group investigated Katsugoro's narrative (Katsugoro Umarekawari Monogatari Tankyu Chosadan) for the Hino City Museum of Local History. The number of founding members was 32, but membership was 62 by the time their investigative report was published in 2015.^[18]

Amongst the group members were Katsugoro's and Tozo's relatives. The report includes many remarkable discoveries, one of which is 'A Note of Reborn Katsugoro', which records Oshizu's (Shizu's) words.^[19] According to the note, when Katsugoro and Genzo were investigated by the officer, they were given some souvenirs and money. When Katsugoro came to Hodokubo village at night, he slept with Oshizu and Hanshiro, held in their embrace as if he were their real child.^[20] When Hanshiro went to Nakano village, they treated him to sake. Katsugoro helped Genzo make sieves and baskets.

Other sources reveal that in 1825 when Katsugoro was eleven, he became a student of HIRATA Atsutane and studied for at least a year. He married twice, adopted a child in 1854, and died in 1869 at the age of 54 (55 in the traditional Japanese manner of counting one's age). Katsugoro appeared to have led an ordinary life as a village farmer where he was born.^[21]

Cultural Background of the Story of Katsugoro

One might assume that Katsugoro's story was heavily influenced by Japan's cultural background at that time, in which all citizens affiliated with nearby Buddhist temples, which in turn, were controlled by the central government. The investigator HIRATA Atsutane was well aware of the possibility of religious influences on Katsugoro's story and interviewed Genzo, Katsugoro's father, about this. One must remember that Japanese Buddhism is unique: When it was introduced to Japan in the sixth century CE, it became syncretized with the Japanese indigenous religion of Shinto and Shinto gods, especially guardian gods of a particular place, and the land of one's birth remains worshipped. Therefore, although many Japanese were familiar with the notion of reincarnation, they knew it only as a Buddhist dogma and were more sympathetic with the animistic Shinto views of life and death.

Reflecting on this general cultural background, Genzo said that he was not a big believer in Buddhism. Since childhood, he donated money to beggars or Buddhist practitioners when they came to his home. Although his family members worshiped the guardian god at the shrine only on special days, he did so every day. When he had a chance, he prayed at Buddhist temples but only prayed for a peaceful day. It also happened that while many people around him joined a Buddhist group that met regularly to pray to Buddha, he kept a distance.

When the story of Katsugoro became widely known, Buddhist monks from various places came and asked Genzo to let them have Katsugoro as a disciple. Some of them even warned that if he made such a special kid as Katsugoro a farmer, he would be punished by Buddha. Genzo declined their offer, stating that Katsugoro hated Buddhist monks, that he (Genzo) also disliked them, and that if Katsugoro was not destined to become a farmer he would not have been born to him. Thus, it is highly unlikely that Katsugoro's statements were fabricated by the influence of household beliefs.^[22]

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References

Footnotes

- 1.^ Ikeda (n.d.); Katsugoro Umarekawari Monogatari Chosadan (2015), 75-77.
- 2.^ Hirata (2000), 363-67.
- 3.^ Hirata (2000), 359-408.
- 4.^ Katsugoro Umarekawari Monogatari Chosadan (2015), 26-28.
- 5.^ Hearn (1897).
- 6.^ Stevenson (1960).
- 7.^ The following account is based on Hirata (2000), translated by the present author with some modifications.
- 8.^ 'O-' in 'Oshizu' is an honorific prefix, so 'Oshizu' and 'Shizu' refer to the same person.
- 9.^ Concerning this part of the story, Lafcadio Hearn (1897, 280) notes: 'Children in Japan, among the poorer classes, are not weaned until an age much later than what is considered the proper age for weaning children in Western countries. But 'four years old' in this text may mean considerably less, than three by Western reckoning'. According to the recent investigation, she should have been two years old at that time (Katsugoro Umarekawari Monogatari Chosadan (2015, 129-30).
- 10.^ This account is drawn from the work of HIRATA Atsutane.
- 11.^ HIRATA Atsutane noted: 'His remarks on monks were made when I said to him, 'I hear monks are to be respected and that their sutras and prayers will lead you to be born in a beautiful place. Didn't you see heavens or hells?'
- 12.^ Bolitho (2012) made a similar point about the figure Katsugoro encountered resembling a Shinto tutelary deity.
- 13.^ This excerpt is a compilation of Katsugoro's words.
- 14.^ In the Edo period, among farmers, a child could become a kind of pseudo child of a family by a contract, especially when the child's family was poor, and the family the child came to be affiliated with was rich enough to support him/her. In return, the child would take care of family matters of the affiliated family. The child was called 'a contract family' (literal translation of the Japanese word) and the parent was called 'a contract parent'. This practice differed from adoption, in that the child was still considered a child of his biological family.
- 15.^ Hirata (2000), 378-79.
- 16.^ Hirata (2000), 376.
- 17.^ Katsugoro Umarekawari Monogatari Chosadan (2015), 104.
- 18.^ Katsugoro Umarekawari Monogatari Chosadan (2015).
- 19.^ Katsugoro Umarekawari Monogatari Chosadan (2015), 125.
- 20.^ It is not uncommon for a Japanese child to sleep with their parents until he/she reaches puberty.
- 21.^ Katsugoro Umarekawari Monogatari Chosadan (2015), 31-32.
- 22.^ Hirata (2000), 379-80. In the report by IKEDA Kanzan, Katsugoro showed respect to Buddhist monks. HIRATA Atsutane asked Genzo whether this statement was correct, to which Genzo said, 'What I heard from Katsugoro was quite contrary. I wonder if he might have said

that to his grandmother, but I haven't heard such remarks from him' (Hirata, 2000, 379-80). It might be the case that Katsugoro's grandmother inserted her own view when she talked about his story to IKEDA Kanzan.

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