

What can you say  
about the nature of  
aristocratic 'marriage'  
and 'family' in the ...

[Family](#), [Marriage](#)



Aristocratic marriages in mid-Heian period in “Gossamer Years” depict visiting marriages without formal ceremonies.

Politics plays a significant role and men can have multiple wives and concubines. While the nature of aristocratic marriage and family in this period appears peculiar to us; the practices in marriage and family in mid-Heian period are actually more reasonable than it might sound at first if we approached with the widespread point of view back then. Instead of moving in together after marriage, the husband and wife still live separately. The wife remains in her parent's residence and the husband visits the wife during his spare time. Also, the wife is responsible for raising children. The demonstration of this practice is shown throughout the book.

Although this type of marriage practice might be seen as unusual from today's scope where the equality between men and women is a norm, this is not the case if we approach it from an older point of view where male dominates the society and have the right to make all the decisions in the household. In marriage, the three people who have exclusive rights to decide things in marriage are the fathers of both sides and the husband himself. If the question about where the lady should live is raised assuming there is no visiting marriage practice, the father would definitely want his daughter to stay with him in his residence. Husbands of the first category, that have a single love and are thinking about having only one lover in his life, will probably want the lady to reside with him.

On the other hand, husbands of the second category that have multiple lovers will probably think otherwise since staying together in the same house

with the lady will most likely bring trouble for him later. Men of mid-Heian probably fall to the second category judging from the situations in “Gossamer Years” where the prince has multiple relationships and the author is only the second wife (Tokihime is the first wife judging from how many sons she gave birth to). Both sides most likely agree to have the lady stay at parent’s residence which explains why this practice of visiting marriages is so widespread in Heian aristocratic society. When something is practiced for generations, it eventually turns into a norm.

Heian marriage in Gossamer Year is also characterized by the fact that there is no formal ceremony before a couple is considered married. Prior to the quote, “ It had meanwhile become clear that I was to have a child. ” (p. 7), there is no place where a marriage ceremony is described or a shock about having a child which indicate that marriage ceremony is not a custom during mid Heian period. Aristocratic men of Heian period tended to have multiple wives and having a formal ceremony for each wife will be a daunting task.

In the Heian age, transportation is also not very convenient so assembling aristocrats to attend formal marriage ceremony will also sacrifice a significant amount of time on the audience’s end that could have been used to work for the society. Arranging formal marriage only for some wives will most likely precipitate frictions in family. Another less but still peculiar aspect of Heian Marriage is that it is highly influenced by politic as the following quote indicate. “ You cannot continue to ignore such a man,” she said. “ You must stop being so kittenish. ”(p. 34) Here the author’s mother emphasizes to her that she should accept the prince’s feeling even if she

does not have any for him only because he is from a higher aristocratic class. This aspect of Heian marriage also exists in today's society especially in Asia.

Richer and more powerful families do it to keep their power while others do it to raise their social status. The type of aristocratic marriages present in mid-Heian period, as illustrated in *Gossamer Years*, have since faded out through the passage of time. The trace is so faint that we feel marriage customs during mid-Heian period sound unusual, but on the other hand they are probably the most appropriate type of marriage for their circumstances.