

Princess Kiko: Japan's Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon?

Contributed by Dr. Janice Seto
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This past week the ongoing, often controversial and heartbreaking desire for a male heir to one day inherit the throne of Japan has taken a new twist with news that Emperor Akihito's second son and his wife, Princess Kiko, are expecting their third child. With this announcement comes yet more anticipation that after a barren spell of over 30 years, the Chrysanthemum throne may soon welcome a male heir.

Dr. Janice Seto offers a fascinating insight into the rumours and ramifications surrounding the news of one of the most highly anticipated royal pregnancy's.

Referring to the 1923 nuptials of Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon and Prince Albert, Duke of York, the Archbishop of Canterbury was quoted as saying there was only one royal wedding the nation wanted more. Although true, it is perhaps not the most tactful of remarks to have made.

To paraphrase: "It is good that the Spare gets hitched, now let's find a nice girl for the Heir."

And

so as big as the fanfare was back in 1990 around the wedding of Prince Akishino, second son of the Emperor of Japan, to Miss Kiko Kawashima, the daughter of a maths professor and his middle-class wife, it was but a dress rehearsal for the marriage of the Crown Prince in 1994.

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[includes/jumies/rectanglew.php]}For

we in the West, recall when Prince Joachim of Denmark married Alexandra Manley. And imagine Prince Harry marching down the aisle of Westminster Abbey this summer to Chelsy (gotta duck...you readers are passionate! I am joking and equally appalled at the idea).

On

February 7th 2006, the Japanese Parliament learnt that the consort of the second son of the Emperor is pregnant with her third child. If this child is a son, Princess Kiko stands to gain prominence over Crown Princess Masako, with a child in the succession, as Joanne mentions in her article.

Who is this Princess Kiko?

Quite worldly, Princess Kiko spent some years in the US and Austria as her father was a maths professor (shades of Mary Donaldson). She also speaks English and German as well as Japanese. Notably, she has had great success in life as a Princess while the Crown Princess shrinks and saddens. She has the backing of the Palace rather than bucking the Palace.

The relations between the Japanese versions of St James' Palace and Buck House are cool — with the Nippon 'Yorks', it is warmer. This is seen in the favourable attitude by the grey men of the Imperial Household Agency. Kiko often travels abroad with her husband, in contrast to the polyglot Crown Princess. Rumour has it they say: "No foreign travel until you produce a son."

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[includes/jumies/rectanglew.php]}In dodging the criticism directed by many in the media and the Japanese Imperial Household, it is fair for me to call her Japan's Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon halo.

Most certainly, fewer expectations about the wife of number two took her away from the emotional misery of Crown Princess Masako and Empress Michiko. Rumour has it she was expected to settle the lively Prince Akishino down, and

the Imperial Household Agency is glad of it.

Working as a team, Kiko attracts little attention away from her husband in their formal duties.

As

US talk show host Dr Phil would say, the price of the relationship is too high if you have to give up yourself. And it seems Princess Kiko has retained her sense of self through study.

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[includes/jumies/rectangle.php]}The royal couple have both led academic lives at Gakushuin University. He pursues research in ornithology and earned a doctorate in the field. She finished graduate work in psychology from Gakushuin University.

It is unfortunate that Crown Princess Masako has attracted muted criticism in her raising of Princess Aiko, whereas nary a word about the Akishino family. Talk about kicking someone when they are down!

Being

Asian myself, I know the expectation to 'take one for the team' or in this case, the Imperial family. In this case, many would say that if the Crown Princess cannot do her duty, she needs to step aside. Quietly go away, divorce even.

By not budging and advocating the rights of her daughter, Crown Princess Masako reminds us all of the bright Katherine of Aragon and her defence of Mary Tudor's rights to the throne.

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[includes/jumies/rectangle.php]}The division in Japan regarding the bill to allow Empresses to reign seems retrograde to we Westerners. We are used to female succession and see it as a matter of equal rights.

In Japan, where nobility and collateral royal lines were abolished after World War Two, everything focuses on a very narrow, male-dominated definition of the imperial family.

Since

no sons have been born since 1965, this is on the verge of extinction. Think of Norway in 1967 — it was down to King Olav and Crown Prince Harald, since two Princesses had married commoners. Had something happened to Harald before he married and sired children, would the monarchy have just disappeared?

There is more to the debate on this bill, the urgency of which may be lessened due to Princess Kiko's pregnancy and the possibility of a son precluding this discussion.

By refusing to divorce Masako, the Crown Prince recalls Charles II, who loyally stuck by Queen Catherine, his barren Portuguese consort. That would make Prince Akishino a modern-day James II with his two daughters.

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[includes/jumies/rectanglew.php]}Not that Princess Kiko is Mary of Modena — there would not be a repeat of the warming pan rumours!

Whether or not Japan and its people, from the Emperor down, will finally have their prayers for a male heir answered, only time will tell. What is certain, though, is that this will be one of the most anticipated royal births of recent times.