The Religious World of Salmon

— A Study on the Role of Folk Religionists
in the Formation of Fishing Ceremonies —

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In Japan, the salmon is a fish around which have formed the most complex folk customs. These customs have been developed into a unique manner in the country, on the basis of the Northern Culture, often with the addition of new elements or transformed into something quite different. In this paper, the author examines Japanese salmon-related folk elements which overlay the basic cultural background derived from the Northern Culture, and discusses developments and expressions characteristic to Japan. Specifically, the author focuses on the part played by folk religionists in salmon ceremonies in Japan, and what unique features they generated.

This paper is composed as follows: Initially, four areas are taken for the purpose of investigation and comparison of the quality and extent of the religionists' commitment to salmon ceremonies in each of these areas. An intensive case study on one area is conducted in Chapters 2 through 5, so that the results may be used as a basis for comparison. Then, the remaining three areas are checked for the problems drawn from the case study. The points that the author wishes to clarify through this comparative investigation are; firstly, the relation between the salmon ceremony as a fishing ceremony and that as a religious ceremony; secondly, the factors which generated the similarities and commonness between them; and thirdly, the question of the religionists who supported these ceremonies.

Under what circumstances can a fishing ceremony be changed into a religious ceremony? In other words, the question of how a fishing ceremony can sublimate into a religious one can be answered by a statement it is a process of integration, refinement and systematization of a ceremony, in which a truly Japanese way of development is seen. Here also arises the question as to how the unique development infiltrated into inland Japan. The author considers that the persons who contributed to this infiltration were a major factor in the process Japanization of salmon ceremonies. They were, without any doubt, religionists who possessed a background of religious ideas of mountaineering asceticism. They must have flexibly absorbed the salmon ceremonies into their intrinsic incantatory systems.