Vanished Customs

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A number of customs disappeared after the Age of Civil Wars. In this paper, the author verifies some examples concerning the Upper Suwa Shrine in Nagano prefecture, and considers their background.

The first custom to disappear after the Age of Civil Wars was the use of sacred ashes for cursing. In 1456, a vassal of OGASAWARA Munekiyo broke a sakaki branch, the symbol of the duty of Otō at the shrine. The chief priest of the Upper Shrine, saying that OGASAWARA Munekiyo had offended divine intention, cursed him by scattering sacred ashes in the moat of his residence. Consequently, Munekiyo died the next year in madness. In 1472, sacred ashes were again scattered to intimidate a person who did not fulfill his duty as Otō. Cursing with sacred ashes is not carried out in the Modern Age, and no legend concerning it has been handed down.

The second custom which disappeared is the use of a “treasure bell” for making a vow. From historical documents, it is known that, after 1471, a “treasure bell” was shaken to make a vow, and the bell was extensively used for the swearing of oaths throughout the Age of Civil Wars. However, no such examples can be found in historical documents after 1582, and the use of a “treasure bell” in making a vow is not even known in the Modern Age.

The third custom to disappear is the belief that the shrine buildings of the Upper Suwa Shrine rumbled to warn the Suwa Clan and others of danger. From 1466 to 1540, the Shrine often rumbled. After such a rumbling, some incident always occurred. For this reason, the rumbling was taken to be as an evil omen of upheaval or disturbance in the Suwa region. However, both the rumbling and such beliefs regarding the rumbling have been completely forgotten in the Modern Age.

The matters that I have described above show that for the people of the Middle Ages, the gods were powerful beings close at hand. Various happenings were considered as manifestations of gods will. People tried to learn the divine intention through these extraordinary events, and acted appropriately. However, in the Modern Age, the consciousness of the people changed drastically, and these customs disappeared.