Rituals and Beliefs Surrounding Tree Spirits — the Case of Monobe Village, Kochi Prefecture —

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The focus of this paper is a study of the rites and magic of a professional group, with discussion centering on examples of the woodcutters of Monobe village in the eastern part of Kochi Prefecture.

These woodcutters, or soma in Japanese, are engaged in the profession of tree felling. Many of the folk customs accompanying their work are based on beliefs surrounding the tree spirits that are believed to dwell in trees, mountain gods, and other supernatural beings. There is the rite called kodama-okuri, which involves the return of tree spirits to mountain gods deep in the mountains when trees are felled, and the rite called kabuki-shizume, undertaken to appease the stump when a sacred tree has been felled. The magical rites performed by the woodcutters are called soma-ho, or woodcutter rites. One characteristic of these rites is that they are conducted with the axes that are the tools of their trade serving as ceremonial objects, and it was believed that tools that met special criteria in terms of shape and form displayed magical powers.

The village is well known for the popular religion called Isanagi-ryu that has been passed down through the generations, and some woodcutter rites have been incorporated in this religion. Rites that had been conducted originally by these woodcutters came to form the core of rituals with a strong mystical quality that were performed under this religion.

Popular folk customs such as these woodcutter rites were performed with axes and saws that were used in their work until the mid 1960s. However, these rites fell into rapid disuse with the introduction of chainsaws, milling equipment, and other machinery, and with the wide-ranging reforms forest-ryu was subjected to when clear-felling and dense planting were introduced as district forest offices and labor unions pursued their own interests.

This paper is a continuation of an earlier study already published by the author under the title "Craftsmen of Monobe Village and Construction Rituals". This earlier study on the beliefs of craftsmen in this region surrounding tree spirits focused on the construction rituals of carpenters.