Cholera in 1858 and the Transfer of the Deities of Yoshida Jinja Shrine: The Cholera Scare in the Villages of Shimo-kanuki and Fukara in Sunto County, Suruga Province

Takahashi Satoshi

What sort of behavior do people exhibit when their lives are at risk and the survival of their community is at stake? Of course, systems that govern a community as part of its administration whose original duty is to protect life are placed in an abnormal time and space in which they are unable to relieve the anxieties of the people.

In this paper I attempt to provide detailed evidence on the cholera outbreak of 1858 that suddenly posed a threat to people’s lives and how the people responded to this and how they attempted to escape from this crisis. 1858 was the year of the invasion of the black ships, or “foreigners”, and was also a time when the fear of large earthquakes and large tsunami that had continued to shake the land in the early and mid 1850s had not yet abated.

It was at such a point in time that cholera made its onslaught. Said to cause instantaneous death and as a sickness that was highly contagious, there was little that medical practices could do for this condition that led to mass fatalities. Thus, every possible Shinto, Buddhist and popular deity, as well as the supernatural, was mobilized to fend off impending catastrophe.

In this paper, I study the actions of the people who lived in Shimo-kanuki village, Sunto County, Suruga Province (present-day Shimo-kanuki, Numazu City) and Fukara village (present-day Fukara, Susono City). Although the existence of recorded histories detailing the actions of the villagers is incidental to the selection of these two villages for this study, the main reason for their selection is that both these villages sought to escape from the calamity of cholera by means of the transfer of deities from Yoshida Daigengu.

But why did they turn to transferring deities from Yoshida Jinja Shrine? I explore this question by exposing the anxieties of these people who, as a result of the cholera outbreak, were situated in an abnormal time and space, together with the energies of these people as they faced the threat of cholera, while examining the process of decision making in the village communities and the dominance of Shinto by Yoshida Jinja Shrine.

The transfer of deities from Yoshida Jinja Shrine required money, including that for religious practices such as prayer fees and chinsatsu, not to mention the costs of going to and
from Kyoto. The two villages of Shimo-kanuki and Fukara demanded alms from their inhabitants amounting to enormous sums of money and requested the highest grade of prayer (kobako). After returning to their villages they went so far as to build Yoshida shrines, which they designated as shrines for preventing calamities such as cholera.