A Refined Lantern Procession to Pray for Rain: the Case of Hyogotsu at the End of the Edo Era

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Starting on the third day of June 1852, the 27 machi of Hyogotsu (currently the 26 machi in Hyogo-ku and Aioi-machi in Chuo-ku, Kobe City) took part in a grand lantern procession along the Saigoku-kaido in which they prayed for rain. This paper looks at this refined "tsukuri-mono", which may also be described as a pageant of light, color and sound.

The practice of praying for rain is associated with prayers by mountain ascetics, and as such is an exceedingly religious practice. However, the practice of praying for rain described here is too ostentatious for a ritual performed at a time of crisis, and from the illustrations contained in the newly found "Fukuhara Record of Prayers for Rain in June 1852" it is a lively and entertaining procession of the kind one would see at a parade at a theme park. It resembles a festival parade that is aware of the gaze of onlookers.

At the end of this document it is recorded that a total of more than 10,300 people took part in the procession, as well as 5,000 helpers from Kitahama and Minamihama, 1,200 torches, 407 small hanging bells, 304 drums, 4 large hanging bells, 30 "hatcho" bells (usually attached to the body), 63 conch shells and 7,120 hand-held lanterns. The method of praying for rain for the villages involved the villagers using the bells, drums, conch shells, etc. to produce noise at the same time as they were forming a procession in which the participants held torches as they departed from the site of the tutelary deity, completing a circuit of the village, climbing a nearby sacred mountain, descending to the banks of a river where they gathered the torches together in a bundle and burned them in a practice known as the "thousand torches" (senbon shomei). We may assume that this example from Hyogotsu was an urban version, although peasants living in 16 of the 18 towns in the area within Hyogotsu took part in the procession, which suggests the seriousness of the continued dry weather for farming. For rice cultivation, the amount of rain that falls in the beginning of the sixth month following the lunar calendar when the rice is starting to grow is a matter of life or death.

Unlike the annual events that are repeated each year, practices like praying for rain that are special one-off practices display the creativity of each town and truly exhibit the spirit of refined practices (furyu).