The Establishment and Development of a Festival in a Rural Town During the Early Modern Period: on the Case of Honjuku in Sawara-Mura, Shimousa

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The village of Sawara in Katori-gun in Shimousa Province prospered through the Edo period as a base for boat transportation along the Tone River. By 1695, the township covered a wide area, making it a rural town, and by 1740 with a population of 3,819 inhabitants it had become one of the leading large settlements in the Kanto region. The village was divided into two parts: Honjuku and Shinjuku. Honjuku was subdivided into three (actually two) social and regional groupings called "kumi", and "machii", or local neighborhoods, were formed within these kumi supported by economic development.

This paper presents an example of the Establishment and development of festivals in rural towns during the Early Modern Period using the Gion Festival that was held in Honjuku as an example. Originally, Honjuku did not have any festivals that were large enough to be considered festivals. Two Shinto rituals took place in June by Tenno Shrine, the tutelary shrine for Honjuku. One was the Hamaori ritual, which took place on the foreshore, and the other was the Gion ritual. These rituals were led by prominent residents of Honjuku who were the household heads of two families which played a major role in the two respective kumi. However, in 1703 the two rituals were combined to form a continuous festival to which staying in a temporary shrine and making a circuit of the area with portable shrine (for both the outward procession and the return procession) had been added. This became the Gion Festival.

The Gion Festival developed gradually. Of particular note is the expansion in 1767 of the area covered by the return procession to include all of Honjuku, which was followed the next year by the participation of processions in all the machi that included floats, resulting in a much bigger festival. However, a violent confrontation arose between the machi concerning the order of the procession attached to the parade of portable shrine. Ultimately, one large festival procession was formed in the shape that processions of all the machi led the parade of portable shrine. In the course of this confrontation the various machi freed themselves from the control of the kumi. As a result, by 1822 a system had been established whereby the operation of the two rituals continued to be carried out by prominent villagers while the operation of the two processions was carried out by the machi. Development into the festival by the addition of the parade of portable shrine to the two rituals led by
village leaders with the kumi as a unit saw the machi that had been created in the village assume the role of operating the festival procession.