Incantations and Civilization in the Beginning of the Meiji Era
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In the early years of the Meiji era, the commonalty used to practice incantations, especially for curing diseases. They asked priests of Shugen-do and temples to perform incantations, visited and paid homage at shrines and temples, posted tags of charm on front doors of their houses to get rid of spirits of disease, and so on. Fortunetelling was also common. These incantations had prevailed since the Edo era.

While the Administration regulated these “old customs” by laws, they made a modern medical system, and made people cultivated through admonitions by priests of shrines and temples. The civilian also tried to enlighten the commonalty using published matters (books and newspapers). Although these actions did not accord well together in their principles and means, both of them regarded incantations and old customs which the commonalty practiced everyday as “wrong religion” “against modern nation” or “imaginary things”. They made propaganda for Enlightenment loudly. This climate had risen until 1874-5.

However, under Civilization, people did not throw their own customs away immediately, including incantations for disease. In 1879, an epidemic of cholera stroke Japan. Patients climbed to 160,000, about 100,000 people died. In this disaster, the Administration handed out antiseptic solutions and prohibited people gathering theaters, and holding Natsu-harai (summer festival). But in Japanese old customs, summer festivals had been held to drive away the diseases, so the commonalty resisted these dispositions. As they believed that they were able to prevent cholera by incantations, they bought tags of charm against spirits of disease, and often visited shrines and temples. When people paraded their community with Mikoshi (portable shrine) or Shishi-gashira (mask of lion’s head), especially young people joined. Because they did not trust the Administration or the police and thought of antiseptic solutions as poison, they sometimes raised a riot for the police and hospitals. Some of officials in community even believed incantations and joined Harai (purification) with priests of shrine. These movements were cracked down on, observations of affairs related incantations decreased presently.

However, we can find various incantations in literature and records of folklore after the Taisho era. The commonalty had retained their own culture in their community. Incantations have been a part of life. Meanwhile, people became accustomed to modern medical and educational systems. They had two different senses; old and modern in their inner side.

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