

Current Significance of Rituals to Drive Away Illness: the Case of Ja mo Ka mo (Snake Also, Mosquito Also) Festival in Kanagawa Prefecture Originating in Susanoo Mythology

YAO Qiong

In ancient times when medical technology was not developed, rituals to drive away illness must have been an expression of people's fear of it. Thousands of years ago, people were totally helpless against illness. Therefore, it was quite common to turn to the power of God not only in Japan but also in China and Korea. Regular worship of God, who was believed to ward off illness, represented people's wish to keep diseases away.

Nowadays, however, with advanced medical technology, when one suffers from infectious diseases including influenza, one goes to a clinic or hospital and draws on the power of scientific medical technology rather than pray to God. Nevertheless, rituals to drive away illness — the only hope for overcoming illness thousands of years ago — are still observed throughout Japan, even though technology is available in almost every field.

Japan's rapid economic growth in the mid 20th century significantly affected its traditional folk culture. Rituals to chase away illness have been preserved as a form of the culture, but the makeup of organizers of the rituals, the elements of driving away diseases and the significance of those rites for people who would pass down the folk custom to the next generation have changed considerably over time. This paper will focus on the Ja mo Ka mo Festival, which has its origin in Susanoo Mythology and has been held in Namamugi, Tsurumi Ward, in Yokohama City, Kanagawa Prefecture, in examining changes in rituals to ward away illness and their significance in modern Japanese society.