

**Session 5 :
The Nagahama Hikiyama Festival and its Transmission**

NISHIKAWA Takeo
SAZANAMI Yasuhisa
Nagahama Hikiyama Cultural Association
5 February 2011

Outline

1. The Lord Hideyoshi and the Beginnings of the Nagahama Hikiyama Festival
2. Kodomo Kyogen (kabuki by children) and Shagiri (festival music)
3. Solidarity in Yamagumi Groups
4. Organizations for the Transmission of the Festival and their Activities
5. Conclusion

1. The Lord Hideyoshi and the Beginnings of the Nagahama Hikiyama Festival

The Nagahama Hikiyama Festival has its roots in the Tachiwatari sword parade started by the lord Hideyoshi when he built a castle in Nagahama and restored the festival of the ruined Hachiman shrine more than 400 years ago. Tachiwatari, believed to be the origin of the festival, is still operated by the Naginatagumi district (one of the districts which own the floats.)

There is a well-known tradition, however, about the beginning of the festival according to which Hideyoshi gave a large amount of gold dust to the citizens of Nagahama to celebrate the birth of his son while he was in Nagahama. This gold dust enabled the citizens to build the floats that were pulled along the streets.

Although it is impossible to historically identify the son during his time in Nagahama, Hideyoshi is considered to have helped start the Hikiyama festival, financially, because he made an enormous contribution to the establishment of Nagahama through the exemption of an annual tribute and labor. This in turn led to the development of the silk industry. Decorations of the Hikiyama floats with splendid metal adornment, lacquering and back tapestries represent the prosperity and success of the city.

2. Kodomo Kyogen (kabuki by children) and Shagiri (festival music)

The uniqueness of the Hikiyama floats in Nagahama is that they are built as a moving stage, and what is performed on the stage is kodomo kyogen (kabuki by children), the major attraction of the festival (kabuki is a stylized classical Japanese dance drama.)

Kodomo kyogen is performed by changing “real” kabuki, i.e. kabuki performed by professional actors so that it is suitable for the stage size of a float, and it can be performed within 40 minutes. Actors are all boys aged 5 to 12.

Kodomo kyogen has over 250 years of history. The book of scripts in 1742, and also records of plays in 1769, show that kabuki had already been performed in Nagahama during that time. Kabuki is considered to have been brought to Nagahama by merchants of the town who made many trips to Kyoto for selling silk. Kabuki was in fashion in Kyoto, so that is the reason it was taken into the festival in Nagahama and later came to be performed on the moving stage.

Kabuki performances require much practice, therefore choreographers intensively teach boy actors how to act like professionals while they are off for spring holidays during a three week period beginning the last half of March. First, they have to memorize lines written in the old fashioned language by reading the book of scripts, then they practice movements required in kabuki

performances. The narrator, called *tayu*, who explains the story of the kabuki play, and *shamisen* (3-stringed Japanese lute) player, as an accompaniment to *tayu*, join the practice to complete the play when the festival approaches.

Although *kodomo kyogen* used to be performed on all twelve *hikiyama* floats until 1917, we saw a decrease in the number of floats giving kabuki performances at the festival after the interruption by World War II. Only four of the twelve floats have participated in the festival since 1954.

While *kodomo kyogen* centers on giving performances to spectators, festival music is associated with movements of the floats, and a number of float festivals all over Japan have some sort of accompaniment music. Floats and accompaniment music are inseparable. The music is considered to have come into being when *Hikiyama* floats were built.

Festival music played in the Nagahama *Hikiyama* Festival is called *shagiri*. There are roughly two types of tunes played which correspond to festival scenes: one is played when floats move, and the other is played before and after *kodomo kyogen*. Musicians are boys, girls and adults of each float group. Currently more than 200 children, young men, and young women take part in the festival as *Shagiri* musicians. Musical instruments used in *Shagiri* comprise *shinobue* (flutes), *taiko* (drums) and *surigane* (flat gong). On the float, 3 to 4 children usually play flutes, and drums and flat gong are respectively played by one person. On the days of the festival, the musicians play on the second story of the floats. Since only men are allowed on the floats, girls play *shagiri* around or in back of the floats. Taking part in the festival as a *shagiri* musician during the festival period is regarded the same as attending school classes in in the Nagahama area (the same is true for boy actors). While boy actors practice kabuki for only three weeks during spring holidays, each float group gathers children once a week throughout the year for *shagiri* practice at a house or a hall owned by someone in each district, and practices are also conducted at the *hikiyama* museum.

3. Solidarity in Yamagumi groups

Organizations that manage the *hikiyama* festival are *sotoban* and 13 *yamagumi* groups. *Sotoban* is an executive committee consisting of representatives mainly from *yamagumi* groups, a team which is responsible for the preservation of the floats. Usually a *yamagumi* group consist of several districts of a town, but some *yamagumi* groups consist of just one district. Members of *yamagumi* groups are divided into three roles according to their age, i.e. *churo*, *wakashu* and boy actors. *Churo* members are over 45 years old and manage the festival. *Churo* is also responsible for pulling the float. The youngest group of men aged from 18 to 45, called *wakashu*, are responsible for *kodomo kyogen*.

Boy actors are chosen from residents in each *yamagumi* group, but if the district has a shortage of suitable boys, it is necessary to ask boys from other districts. Some of the actors become involved in *kodomo kyogen* later in life as a *wakashu* member. *Wakashu* members choose the boys, decide the play to be performed and the *sanyaku* roles, and make arrangements for costumes, wigs and stage settings. They devote themselves to taking care of the boys, above all, as they were once cared for by *wakashu* members when they performed kabuki. After finishing their *wakashu* role, they become involved in the management of the festival as *churo*.

Three generations play each role in the festival. Participants feel attachment and pride for the festival in the unity of the three parties. After the festival they share joy and have a stronger sense of solidarity than ever before.

Events in the Nagahama *Hikiyama* Festival are handled exclusively by men. Women, in contrast, support the festival as spectators. This is a festival by men on the surface, but it is women's enthusiasm that supports the festival. The festival is transmitted by all people, beyond age or gender.

4. Organizations for the Transmission of the Festival and their Activities

The festival has over 430 years of history and kabuki has been performed on the hikiyama floats built more than 270 years ago. Floats over 250 years old have been handed down to us and maintained until now. Despite its long-lasting history, we faced a drastic change after World War II.

There are three main instructors called sanyaku (three roles), which are indispensable to kodomo kyogen: furitukeshi, the choreographer, tayu (the narrator), and syamisen (the 3-stringed Japanese lute) player. Traditionally these people came to the festival from neighboring areas of Nagahama, in addition to hikiyama communities. However, rapid postwar economic growth and changing lifestyles as a result of it, caused younger generations to move to cities. Aging of successors of sanyaku roles became a problem. Similarly, we have seen a drastic decline in the number of shagiri participants from rural areas. The festival has been maintained not only by primary successors of the festival in the hikiyama community, but by neighboring communities in the region. Consequently, the decrease in the number of participants in sanyaku roles left us no choice but to ask professional syamisen players and tayu in remote regions such as Aichi, Shikoku and Hokkaido to perform. Moreover, because there were few Shagiri musicians available in the neighborhood, some yamagumi were forced to use a tape recording of Sharigi at the festival.

Faced with these problems, wakashu members of some yamagumi groups established the Nagahama Hikiyama Festival Shagiri Preservation Association in 1971 with the aim of transmitting shagiri music and training of successors. Shagiri is one of the most successful activities in the preservation and transmission of the Hikiyama Festival due to efforts to write down what was traditionally handed down orally to the next generation, transforming it into musical scores in order for everyone who wishes to learn it to be able to master it. Moreover, the association started to hand down Sharigi, which had been transmitted to only adults, to children to be able to play it all by themselves at the festival. These efforts led to the revitalization of the music.

Initially, boys were the primary successors of shagiri, but girls also wished to take part in the practice. It follows that boys play shagiri on the float and girls play it around the float at the festival. Currently we have more than 200 members, playing it at various events held in the community, as well as the festival.

The Nagahama Hikiyama Festival was designated as an important intangible folk cultural property by the national government in 1979, which led us to establish the Nagahama Hikiyama Festival Preservation Association in order to comprehensively preserve and transmit the festival. The Association is the preceding organization of the foundation, Nagahama Hikiyama Cultural Association, whose mission is the promotion of the Hikiyama events, Kodomo Kyogen, and techniques used in the floats; subsidizing the hikiyama festival; and research, collection and utilization of materials for the festival. We do these projects while taking advantage of the Hikiyama museum that opened in 2000.

We mentioned earlier that sanyaku (three roles), i.e. the choreographer, tayu (the narrator) and syamisen player, required in the performances of kabuki, are often requested by other regions and prefectures. In order to support and transmit unique regional culture, our wish is for people in local communities to get involved in hikiyama festivals. Making use of the local community revitalization project initiated by the Japanese government in 1988, we raised the kodomo kyogen succession fund. Profits from the fund enabled us to hire a professional syamisen player in Nagoya for training of people who wanted to be sanyakus at the festival. This was the beginning of sanyaku shugyo juku (the sanyaku training school). Currently fifteen men and women aged 30 to 80 are trained. These 20-year steady activities bore fruit and five trainees took part in the festival last year, the largest number of participants ever. Moreover, they are even being requested by similar hikiyama festivals taking place throughout the neighborhoods of Nagahama.

The Nagahama Hikiyama Cultural Association, established along with the opening of the Hikiyama Museum, took over the sanyaku shugyo juku and manages projects for transmitting culture derived

from the hikiyama festival. In the kodomo kabuki kyositsu (a kabuki school for children) at the museum, for example, we aim to promote kodomo kyogen by giving children, especially children outside the hikiyama community, the opportunity to experience kabuki just as boy actors do during the festival period. The participants practice kabuki and give a performance in front of spectators during the final stage of the school. Kabuki at the festival is restricted to boys, and actors are residents in the hikiyama community. It is regrettable that many children are excluded from Kodomo kyogen because of such restrictions. Therefore kodomo kabuki kyoshitu is open to both boys and girls, to those outside the community, and to members of sanyaku shugyo juku, especially women, to accompany the kabuki.

The hikiyama museum stores and exhibits the floats deposited from the yamagumi groups. There are four floats stored in the museum and two of them take turns being in permanent exhibition. You can see processions and events of the festival on video at the museum. Although the museum has these functions, the uniqueness of the museum lies in transmitting and developing intangible parts of the festival.

Next we would like to mention briefly the cooperation between the museum and Nagahama west junior high school, which is located near the hikiyama community. It has a program for children to learn about features of the festival in order to develop enthusiastic successors. The school also has hikiyama buka kyositu (class for hikiyama) for exploring the museum and experiencing some of the events of the festival. In the traditional performing art class, they learn shagiri and syamisen, and play them at a recital held at the end of the class. The Nagahama Hikiyama Cultural Association has a succession committee consisting of mainly wakashu members of each yamagumi, cooperating with the school in introducing the museum to students so they can experience performing arts. A staff member of the museum and members of the Shagiri Preservation Association join the class as lecturers. Cooperation and collaboration between the museum and the school are under way, with the aim of encouraging children to become interested in the festival. Children play a central role, among other things in the festival, so we think that they are going to be interested.

5. Conclusion

Culture in rural areas with hundreds of years of history is likely to face a decline due to the rapid social and economical changes of our time. If we overlook it, the culture will die out soon. So as to hand down to the next generation what has been handed down to us,, it is necessary for us to find novel ways to transmit it.

When shagiri was in danger of extinction due to a shortage of successors, what was tried was to transform the tunes into music scores. It is rare for musical scores to be written for music which has been handed down orally because musical scores often include abstract features, unique to the music, making it impossible to represent. Despite such risk, shagiri was transformed into scores, without which it would have been lost for good, and we might not have been able to see some 200 successors playing shagiri at festivals today.

Sanyaku roles, indispensable to kodomo kyogen, require years of training. There is no end point when it comes to improving the required skills. Although there are now fifteen members at the sanyaku shugyo juku, it is difficult for all of them to participate in the festival for reasons related to their skills, and the restriction that only men can ride on the float. However, taking part in the festival does not necessarily mean that the participants are successors of this performing art. Improving skills by training and giving performances on many occasions enables the trainees to transmit their skills to someone who is a prospective performer on floats of the future.

We have made various efforts to preserve and transmit the festival, while continuing the festival year after year. Along with respecting its long history, we are required to have a synchronic point of view in order to be able to deal with all the changes currently taking place.