

Article history: Received 24 March 2016 Accepted 2 May 2016

Continuation of Shishi Matsuri Festival in Murashima village, Japan*

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Abstract

Shishi Matsuri or the Lion Festival is very popular and is often observed in different parts of Japan. Known also as Shishimai or Lion Dance performance, it is a religious festival and an art performance. The fieldwork for this study was carried out in Murashima village, Sugeta town, Ehime prefecture, Japan. The festival is held annually in November and involves everyone in the village. The performers are the local villagers themselves. Although Shishi Matsuri reinforces the sense of belonging, it also creates a sense of collectivity and unity as everyone joins in. Continuation of a tradition of this kind is bound with a number of difficulties and challenges. Financial issues, decreasing young population and natural disasters are but a few such matters faced every year. This study aims to understand the reasons and motivations that make it possible for the community members to carry on with the tradition of the festival despite challenges and difficulties.

Keywords: *Shishi matsuri; lion dance; performing arts; ritual; continuation; difficulties*

Introduction

“Shishi matsuri”, or the “lion dance” festival, has many different forms and is performed throughout all Japan. The fieldwork for this study was carried out in Murashima village, Ehime prefecture, Japan. It is performed on The Culture Day¹, November the 3rd, every year, which is a national holiday aimed at promoting culture, art and academic endeavor. Shishi matsuri is one of the main autumn events of the village. Shishimai or Lion Dance performance is a religious festivity and an art performance. The festival involves all residents of the village and the performers are the local villagers themselves.

Shishi itself is an imaginary animal, which usually stands for a lion but may have many other images. Some of them are the following: dragon, koma inu (guardian dog), kirin (sacred beast), tiger, deer, boar or a bear. Shishi possesses the abilities of flying and dynamism which make it move and dance to the rhythm of drums. This special power creates the belief of purifying the place, or devil exorcism. These art performances play a magical function to quell the

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* This paper was presented at the Japan Anthropology Workshop (JAWS) at Boğaziçi University in September 4th, 2015, Istanbul, Turkey.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_Day. (2015. 8. 15)



evil spirit (Nihon Minzoku Dai Jiten, 1999; Furuno, 1985). According to Shintō Jiten, Shishimai festival is to “pray for protection of the farmlands, celebration of the harvest, Kuyō of the beasts, or even praying for rain” (Shintō Jiten, 1999: 286). As a part of the autumn festivals, Shishimai can be added as one type of Kagura, where the sacred beast Shishi wipes away the evil spirit, and the dance of the Shishi-gashira has a meaning of a charm (Yuasa, Y., Okajima, T., 1986: 223). As a powerful spiritual object that quells the demons that threaten human life, it can be the reason of why folklore of Shishimai spread through the whole country. In the written records of many temples and shrines, the mystical power of the Shishi to expel the disasters which attacked the village, and epidemic diseases which hit the people there, are some of the reasons of why Shishimai was performed (Nihon Minzokugaku Taikei, 1958: 139).

About the origin of Shishi masturi, Yanagita Kunio’s approach is that Shishi Odori, or Deer Dance, is a folk practice indigenous to Japan, which was later replaced with phonetic equivalent Shishi Mai, the Lion Dance, introduced to the country through China (Nakayama, 2007). It was mentioned in the Hōryuji’s Documents Book (Hōryuji Shizaichō), which dates back to the eighth century, to be introduced together with Buddhist musical ritual Gigaku or Bugaku (court musical dance) as the entertainment part of a religious ceremony (Nihon Minzoku Dai Jiten, 1999: 761). Other studies, such as *Chronicles of Japan* (Sugie, 2010) claim that Shishi dance performances might have been introduced in the seventh century by emperor Suiko.

Aim of the study

Murashima village is placed north-east from Ōzu city, two kilometers from Sugeta town on the Hijikawa river road. The village’s location is known for heavy rains, typhoons and river floods. These kinds of natural disasters should be discouraging for people living there. Depopulation, lack of young people and possible financial difficulties must somehow reflect on the festival itself. Long term field work was carried out to reveal the problems people face and the solutions they bring. To conduct this study numerous recordings were done for many years. By talking to the people living there and a closer look at the history of Murashima one can unravel the future of Shishi matsuri festival. The aim of this study is to offer insights into Murashima village and its relationship with Shishi matsuri and the gods of the Shintō Shrine which villagers belong to. Following this, we will see how people of the village face problems such depopulation and decreasing number of the youth, and financial problems if there are any. Meanwhile, all sequences of the performance are going to be introduced. Following surveys with members of Hozonkai (Preservation Society), possible problems regarding the festival’s sustainability will be revealed and solution suggestions will be analyzed.

Murashima village and the Shishi matsuri

Mr. Ikeda, the mayor of Sugeta town (2000), announced a “Project for Conservation of the Local Folk Arts”, at the 50th anniversary of the town (Ikeda Takuichi, Sugeta town festival video, 2000). This project gave start to many festivals around Ōzu city, including Shishi matsuri. Shishi matsuri is performed in some other hamlets near Murashima, such as Ōtake, Hiranosato and Noda. During this anniversary, video recording of the two of them was introduced, “Ōtake Shishiren” and “Murashima Shishi Hozonkai”. The Head of Ōtake Shishiren Hozonkai, Mr. Yano Hirotaka, explains the history and the purpose of the matsuri as following: “Ōtake Shishi endured since the Meiji era; however, it was cancelled during the wars. It started again in 1957, but very soon, youngsters fled to big cities with the beginning of the economic growth and the lack of performing people plunged Shishi matsuri into sleep for a long time. After over thirty year later, the idea of village revitalization resulted in restarting Shishi matsuri in 1989. It started first only with On-Jishi and Men-Jishi. The very next year there was a group of 18 adults and 12 children. The *soul* of Shishi is in Ōtake Jinja, which it is believed to help with marriage ties, good health and rich harvest. The performers start to practice every weekend a month earlier, in October.

The Murashima Shishi Hozonkai representative Mr. Mizumoto gives information about this festival in 2000. Some old residents of the village say that this festival was performed by their ancestors three generations ago. According to this, he says, the festival might have been started in the end of Meiji era or in the beginning of Taisho era. On April 10, every year, there is a Grand Spring Festival at Murashima Jinja accompanied with O-Kagura, dancing ritual prayer for good harvest. Then in November Murashima Jinja holds the Grand Autumn Festival (Shishi Matsuri) to express gratitude for the fruitful harvest and pray for well-being of the household (Kanai-anzen), and for Shishi-gashira ward off evil spirits (Akuma-barai) (Mizumoto Harumi, Sugeta town festival video, 2000).

Yano Kōichi, the head of Murashima Shishi Hozonkai of today, explains that there are 25 members all, out of whom seven or eight people are elementary and junior high school children and 15 or 16 people are high school students and adults. High school members, who are mainly male, are allowed to play drums and dance the Shishi-gashira. There are three or four female members in the troupe. The training of the matsuri starts a month earlier in October, and they gather every day but Sundays, from 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. for children, while adults remain longer. The village consists of 50 houses, and the Shishi troupe proceeds dancing house to house, with intervals every other house all day. One member is carrying the banner flag with the words *Murashima Shishi Hozonkai*.

There are two drums set on each other, Kobachi and Ōdaiko (Figure 1). A decoration of Sakaki plant and Kami-shide stands on the top of the drums,

pointing the sacred Shinto worship. Sometimes it is carried by some members or on a small truck. Once they finish 25 houses from end to end, they start over without rest. The starting point of the troupe changes every year from Kami-Murashima (upper district) to Shimo-Murashima (lower district) or vice versa depending on the order of last festival.



Figure 1: Kobachi and Ōdaiko drums

Every household prepares food and drinks for the performers. Mr. Yano says they were served Chikuwa (a tube-shaped fish sausage), Tenpura (deep-fried vegetables and seafood) and Kamaboko (boiled fish paste) only in the past; however, the variety of food today is richer. The household also prepares a Go-Shūgi (tip) envelope to help for the expenses spend on the matsuri. According to Mr. Yano, they collect an amount of about two thousand hundred yen on this day. Half of this amount is spent on the festival and the rest goes for savings, purchase of goods or

repair.

The population of the village is 165 people, where the average age is 65. There are four elementary school students, six junior high students, and two high school students now in the village (2015). Elementary and Junior high school students go to Sugeta town, the nearest town from Murashima village. High school students go to Ōzu city, six kilometers from the village or even farther. The main industry in Murashima is agriculture. Almost half of the population works on the field and about 70 people are working in or near Ōzu city (Yano Kōichi, personal communication, August 16, 2015).

The Shishi matsuri sequences in Murashima village

A week before the ritual starts, there comes a Shintō priest Kannushi from Ōzu city to do the ritual called Shōnen-ire (to breathe life into the Shishi gashira). The *Kannushi* makes the spirit flow into the body of the Shishi-gashira and that spirit is believed to flow into every household, which helps people get rid of evil. The spirit is being carried to all households of the village by the troupe members. Every member feels this spirit divided inside them and shared with the villagers. This sacred god is already a part of their soul during the ritual, and to parcel it, is a very important mission. The feeling of being together with the god, to touch it, being a part of it and share it with other villagers, who are the same Ujiko members, builds strong bonds between them. However, at the

same time they entertain the god. At the end of the Shishi matsuri ritual, the next morning, members of the troupe take the Shishi-gashira back to the shrine and perform the dance called Shōnen-modoshi (withdraw of life “spirit” out of the Shishi-gashira), to make it free and innocuous. Carrying this spirit makes the troupe members more conscious about the ritual they perform.

The Hozonkai members wake up early, at six in the morning, and start their preparations. A few of them take the Shishi-gashira from the Shūkaijo (public hall of the village) to the truck and depart to Murashima shrine. The shrine is located up on the mountain, about twenty minutes away from the village. This Shinto shrine worships mainly five gods. Those gods are *Ōmononushinomikoto*, *Sutokutenou*, *Oyamadzuminomikoto*, *Ikadzuchinokami*, and *Takaogaminokami*. There was another shrine *Kompira Jinja* in the upper parts of the mountain which collapsed and their gods were also worshiped to Murashima Jinja (Yano Kōichi, personal communication, August 16, 2015). There are three rituals displayed at the Murashima Jinja during the year: The Grand Spring Festival, the Grand Autumn Festival and Niinamesai festival on the New Years Eve.

The members perform the Shishi-gashira dance in front of this Shinto shrine, to which they belong as Ujiko. It takes ten to fifteen minutes in all, and they return back to the Shūkaijo, where the rest of the members are already preparing and dressing up. Make-up of the actors is done in Japanese style: performers are carefully dressed in Kimonos. The first performance starts around eight o'clock and continues non-stop all day long until seven p.m.

The whole performance can be divided into eight cycles. First stage is the Yakubarai, second stage is the Shishi-gashira dance, third stage Shangiri, fourth stage O-saru, fifth stage the Hunter, sixth stage Mitsu, seventh stage Kitsune, and the eighth stage is Men-Jishi.

The first stage “Yakubarai” (Figure 2)

At this stage Shishi Gashira arrives to the entrance gate of the house and prays. This is the performance of Shishi-tsuru and the Male Shishi only. The prayer is as follows:

- ❖ Tozai to-sho-wa Ujigami-sama no matsuri nitsuki Akuma-barai Kyo-gen tsukamatsurimasu. Itatte Yakusha wa buchiho-dewa gozaru kanaredo, sokowa kotowakete onkotowari mo-shiagemasu. Sayo-!

- ❖ Toza-i To-sho-wa Ujigamisama No Matsuri Nitsuki Akumabara i Shishi Kyogen
 東西当所は氏神様の祭りにつき悪魔払い獅子狂言
tsukamatsurimasu Itatte Yakusha wa Buchihou
 つかまつります。至ってやくしゃは不器用
dewagozarukanaredo SokowaKotowakete onKotowari Mo-shi a
 ではござるかなれど、そこは事分けておん断り申し上
gemasu Sayo-
 げます。さよー！

This is an announcement of a good riddance (exorcism), with the help of Ujigami-sama and Shishi farce, apologizing for the clumsy actors. Please, condone!



Figure 2:
Yakubarai
sequence

Shishi-gashira is a wood craft, lacquered in red and black, black bristle and mechanism which allows to move the jaw from inside. The head is decorated with

Sakaki plant, the evergreen sacred Shintō tree, and Kami-shide, a zigzag-shaped paper streamer often used to adorn Shintō related objects. The pattern of the body is not a solid foliage scroll (Karakusa-moyō), but designed like bristle or curly hair of a lion. There are two performers inside the curtain. One plays the head (kashira), and second one moves the tail, which resembles horse tail. On top a short white mane is seen also visible. The performers of the Shishi-gashira dance wear the same pattern trousers or white pants with white *tabi* socks on the foot. Those *tabi*-socks are ankle-high with a split toe. The separation between the big toe and other toes allows them to wear Geta (clogs) or Zōri (straw sandals). Some elderly members of the Shishi matsuri had worn a dark blue happi, with white kanji letter of Matsuri on their back.

The second stage “Shishi-gashira Dance” (Figure 3)



Figure 3: Shishi-gashira Dance
sequence

After this prayer, male Shishi dances vigorously to the drums. Shishi-gashira performers change two or three times at this stage.

The third stage “Shangiri” (Figure 4)



Figure 4: Shangiri sequence

Shangiri is the performer’s introduction. All performers are lined up in a circle and walk singing Migi (right) and Hidari (left) in accordance with the drums rhythm. Usually there are lyrics at this stage, but when pronouncing these words, the performers jump on their left or

right legs.

The fourth stage “O-saru” (Figure 5)



Figure 5: O-saru sequence

This stage is named O-saru-san, where monkeys perform a theatrical farce together with O-Jiisan (old man) and o-yomesan (bride). Monkey role is played by the smallest children of the village. Those are usually elementary school students, or mostly pre-school kids. They wear completely red dress, with

monkey masks on their heads, also rings and colored tassels on their shoes. The old man and the bride sow seeds in the field and monkeys disturb them running around performing some acrobatics.

The bride wears kimono and zōri sandals.

There is a mask on her head with a red cloth round the face, a flag and basket in both hands. She performs sowing seeds walking behind Jiisan, while the Jiisan plows the land with a hoe or a spade. He winds his face with a headband (hachimaki) and a peasant mask on his head. Monkeys are imitating as they disturb the seeds and pull the bride’s dress all the time.

The fifth stage “Hunter” (Figure 6)



Figure 6: Hunter sequence

The hunter comes to hunt the monkeys. The hunters dress is a long coat like kimono and mae-dare apron or a bib with a *Sumikirikaku Chijimi San Moji* crest of Mishima Jinja, the divine deity which exists mostly in Ehime prefecture. The rhythm of this stage accelerates and the dance performance of

the actors fastens.

The sixth stage “Mitsu” (Figure 7)



Figure 7: Mitsu sequence

Mitsu (poaching) is the male Shishi performance again, where the hunter goes to the mountain for hunting and shuts the rampaged Shishi. This performance is played with Shishi dance, while monkeys and fox members dance with flags in hands on the both sides of the Shishi,

performing chasing away -like movements. Fox members are two as well, and wear a completely white dress with fox masks on the head and the same rings with colored tassels on their shoes. There is a tail tied to the back, too. The hunter dances in front of the Shishi in accordance to the drums, and gets down the male Shishi at the end.

The seventh stage “Kitsune” (Figure 8)

Kitsune stage is when Jiisan is setting a trap for the foxes which comes to his land. They dance together around the trap and sing a song:

- ❖ Shinoda no mori no jinji da-mase, damase!
- ❖ シノだの森のジンジダーマセ、ダマセ！

The Jiisan sets a trap for the foxes and tries to attract their attention; however, he himself falls into the trap.



Figure 8: Kitsune sequence

The eighth stage “Men-Jishi” (Figure 9)

The last, eighth stage is the climax of this performance. Here comes the female Shishi dance, where the Shishi-tsure brings the bait and tries to seize her. After a short dance, the female Shishi eats the bait and he takes her back to the mountain.



Figure 9: Men-Jishi sequence

The troupe members perform the Shishi dance and the farce they trained for uninterrupted everyday during October, and people praise them for their patience and efforts. The troupe members are also proud of their performance and do everything possible to entertain the audience. There is a big sense of

harmony between the performers and the villagers.

Lanterns and national flags are hanged out in front of every house, creating an atmosphere of festiveness. After the troupe arrives to the garden of a house, the household members come out to welcome them. Food and drinks are immediately prepared (Figure 10) is brought out and the members are asked to help themselves

Figure 10: Food and drinks served by households



Conclusion

There are more than eighty thousand Shintō shrines and almost the same amount of Buddhist temples all around Japan. Around ten thousand out of the shrines are active and practice many matsuris or religious ceremonies throughout the year. The rituals involve people living close to those shrines, which are called *Ujiko*, a member of a specific shrine. Ruth Benedict emphasized that Japanese children from the very early age play in or around those shrines with their friends knowing that *Ujiko* gods will be protecting them (Benedict, 1946: 178). The Shintō shrine of the Murashima village is located up in the mountain, outside of the village. However, few times of the year, all adults and children of the village come gather at the shrine's ground and perform some religious ceremonies such as *O-Kagura* (Shintō dance and music ritual), *Niinameasai* (New Years Eve ritual) and *Shishi Matsuri* festival. The *Shishi matsuri* is a folkloristic art performance and at the same time, a religious festivity. The ritual consists of rich choreography and theatrical art performances. They start participating at the age of two or three and, going through all stages of the festival, they learn what is necessary. The children are the living memory of this festival and adding new theatrical plays gave opportunity to all age groups to connect the experience to their own soul.

This study reveals that financial issues and depopulation are not serious problems for this festival. The budget of the *Hozonkai* is enough to keep the festival going on. According to Mr. Yano, the amount they collect is of about two thousand hundred yen, out of which half is spent over the festival and the rest goes for savings or to buy some goods and for repairs. The depopulation of the village is not very high. Some young families return to the village. Any decrease in young population and natural disasters are not the reason to stop the performance. The head of Murashima *Shishi Hozonkai* Mr. Yano emphasizes that if any decrease in the number of children may cause the cancelation of some plays, they will continue to perform even with the *Shishigashira* only. Natural disasters also are not a reason to cancel the *matsuri*. In

fact, in the years of 2004, 2005 and 2010, the village had floods and almost all houses were damaged. He says that all these years the festival was continuously performed. Japanese people believe that not performing the Shishimai for one year will thrive the diseases more (Nihon Minzokugaku Taikei, 1958: 139). However, when people are depressed, they need something to switch their mood. The soul of the matsuri is the soul of the village.

This experience reinforces people's sense of belonging and, by joining the festival, it creates the sense of collectivity and integrity. Shishi matsuri brings the sense of possession to the people of the village, which is the guarantor of its continuity. Beyond this, what really makes the youth participate in the festival every year? As to Bascom, four functions of folklore can be grouped together under the single function of maintaining the stability of culture (Bascom, 1954: 348). The continuity of the festival from generation to generation is due to the role of education of the folklore. Folklore is used to inculcate customs and ethical standards in the young and adult alike, to reward them with praise when they conform (Bascom, 1954: 349). The Shishi matsuri festival at Murashima village can also be seen as folkloric education of the youth which inculcates customs and ethics in the young. Adults always praise children participants in terms of reward. This sustains their collectivity and secures the continuation of the festival.

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