Modern Changes in Aomori Nebuta Festival

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This paper addresses the "Aomori Nebuta Matsuri (Aomori Nebuta Festival)", held in Aomori every year from the 2nd through the 7th of August, and considers the process by which it developed into the large-scale urban festival it is today.

Currently, the Aomori Nebuta Festival is an event consisting of the collective effort of a group of people that consists of the following set of three elements: huge doll-shaped lanterns, musical accompaniment, and dancers called "haneto". Although the festival is designated as an important intangible folk cultural property, it is not a religious event connected to any particular temple or shrine and the origins and history of the festival remain uncertain. Similar events are found in Aomori prefecture as well as throughout eastern Japan, and before WWII the Nebuta Festival of Aomori City was not much different from such festivals of other regions. The present style of the Aomori City Nebuta Festival was most likely established after the war. This paper examines the process through which the festival was established and the transformations later undergone by the festival from the following three points: the nebuta itself (lanterns), the organization running the festival, and management conditions.

First of all, with regard to the nebuta itself, the upper limits as to size were determined based on the form of the urban districts of Aomori, with such factors as the width of the streets and the height of the pedestrian overpass being a consideration. The present style of the nebuta was established between 1967 and 1972 through the ingenuity of the creators, called "nebuta-shi". Next, with regard to running the festival, rising expenses brought about a shift from the local organizations to administrative bodies and corporations, giving the organization an equal voice as the sponsors. Lastly, regarding management conditions, provisions for tourists such as setting up seats for viewing the festival to rent, and time restrictions on the use of national roads, as well as increasing incidences of inappropriate behavior by the "haneto" all were taken into account in determining the route of the festival and the number of nebuta.

If we take an overall look at the developments from after WWII, the history of the festival can be divided into five periods. The first period from 1947 when the festival was first truly revived to 1961 was the period of reestablishing the festival after a ten-year gap due to the war. The second period from 1962 to 1967, was the period for the beginning of the making of the festival as a tourist attraction and enlarging the scale of the festival. The third period between 1968 and 1979 was the period in which the "Aomori Nebuta Matsuri" was fully
established and was at its peak. The fourth period from 1980 to 1996, was a transition period, with a rapid rise in the number of "kaneto" and an increase in inappropriate behavior by the young people participating in the festival. Finally, the fifth period, which began in 1997 in response to the outbreak of violence in 1996, is a period of transformation where people are busy looking for countermeasures for inappropriate behavior and this state of trial-and-error still continues today.