The Tromenie of Brittany: Tradition and the Present-day

SHINTANI, Takanori

The Tromenie is a tradition linked to beliefs surrounding saints in Brittany. Annually, or once every six years, a procession carrying crosses and banners is formed to carry the relics of a saint, who came from Ireland and Wales, and follow the route taken by the saint when he was told by a feudal lord that he would grant the saint the land that he was able to cover in one day's walking. The word tromenie is believed to derive from either tro minihi or tromene in the Breton language, meaning a circuit (tro) of the minihi (area surrounding a monastery) or mene (mountains), and because the words tro (circuit) and tour (tour) lead to the establishment of territoire (territory), an etymological closeness between the words tromenie and territoire has emerged. The ritualistic repetition of experiencing for oneself the path of the saint is a reenactment of the establishment of territory and the "return to origins" attributable to this ritual serves a function where the shift from a rigid historical time to a time of flexible folk custom provides an impetus for the beliefs of the participants.

In particular, the traditional folk beliefs of the Bretons in sacred trees, sacred stones, and sacred springs, which are not part of the Catholic doctrine, are visible in the stations set up along the route and the ritualistic performances of the participants. The relationship between the two is not one of assimilation or amalgamation, but is rather a relationship of tacit approval and coexistence. What is characteristic about the participants and their roles is that while in the main the president, fabrician, association, famille, and other volunteers participate by providing an array of services of their own free will, conversely, it is precisely this that results in a flexible yet robust form of participation. There are two different relationships at play in that there are the two relationships of mutual finitude and perpetuity of participants existing on top of the mutual relationships between the three forces that affect traditional events: the impetus to maintain and continue, the power to usher in creative changes, and the pull to suspend or abolish. These combine with each other to form a collective observance, but at the same time it is precisely its form of individual observance, for which the number of individual participants alone has significance, wherein the fundamental force to preserve the tradition lies.