Sarukura Puppet Theater

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Puppet theater (ningyo-shibai) that became popular in the middle of the Edo Era is performed today as bunraku and ningyo-joruri (puppet drama) at the National Bunraku Theaters in Osaka's Nipponbashi. The reason for its survival lies in it being a traditional art form passed on from group to group where the approach to its succession had been clearly established. Nowadays, much attention has been given to the transformation of folk customs, comparisons have been made on the subject of puppet theater between organized traditional culture that is organized and formed on a group basis and traditional culture that is not organized and formed on an individual basis.

In this paper I attempt to explain the reasons for the weakness of individual traditions and for their transitory nature.

Sarukura puppet theater was a form of puppet theater following the hitori-tsukai (handled by one man) technique devised by Ikeda Yohachi. It was an offshoot from bunraku puppet theater performed using the sannin-tsukai (handled by three-man) technique perfected during the Edo Era. It possessed an orientation that was completely converse to that of bunraku in the whereas bunraku had permanent and kabuki-like elements, Sarukura puppet theater was a traveling art form and had a rustic element whereby it was more oriented local folk customs. The most decisive difference between the two was the "tezuma-tsukai" technique of puppetry. This "tezuma-tsukai" rivaled the moving pictures of the day, which later developed into movies. This tezuma-tsukai was the same as a conjuring trick and the sleight of hand that was as quick as a flash of lightening was the key to its success or failure. What is more, it became necessary to develop a succession of new tricks. The world in which it existed was such that it would be subject to natural selection unless new trick were continually being devised. Sarukura puppet theater followed a path that was the opposite of the path of bunraku, which was a collective and traditional art form.

Ikeda Yohachi, the originator of Sarukura puppet theatre, did see ahead to what lay in store for his art form. He retired from it early on and turned to selling confectionary. Thus, this paper examines Sarukura puppet theater from the perspectives of its history, puppetry
technique and composition, and in so doing discusses it as an art form that was a traditional culture performed by an individual as a type of puppet theater performed using the hitori-tsukai technique.