Comparison of Thoughts about the Prevention of Evils through Costumes: Focusing on the Costume Designs of Noro Priests in Amami and Folk Costumes in Northern Laos

KAWANO Kazuaki

In the Amami-shoto Islands, there were once female priests called noro who were ordered by the king of Ryukyu to manage the local religious services. The costumes worn by the noro priests are kept even today as artifacts by individuals of the village, local museums, etc. Among them, Kawano, the author of this article, mainly compared the materials remaining in Amami-Oshima, especially a group called “shibasashigin” remaining in Amuro, Uken-mura, Oshima-gun, with the folk costumes of the minority in northern Laos collected by Kawano in fieldwork and those of the minority in Southeast Asia, collected by the Wilderness Agriculture Museum in the mountain of Sumiyō-son, Oshima-gun (what is today Amami City), at a special exhibition entitled “Costumes of Noro Priests in Amami -- Focusing on Shibasashigin in Amuro, Uken Village” held at the Kagoshima Prefectural Museum of Culture REIMEIKAN, which is the regular workplace of Kawano, from June 10 to September 5, 1999.

Adding new findings obtained in the fieldwork in northern Laos to those obtained in the above exhibition, this article indicates that each design is collectively applied to the openings, corners, curves, and joints of the collars, gussets, sleeves, skirts, underarms, etc. of the costumes of both regions, and that such portions are supposed to involve the risk of permitting the entrance and exit of souls. This article also studies how the designs of red cloths, threads, clusters of narrow cloths, one-stitch dropping, sawtooth patterns, etc. have the function of preventing souls, especially evil spirits, from entering the body and protecting the cleanliness and safety of mind and body.

The article concludes that the above characteristics common to both regions, even in extremely detailed points, are often found not only in the field of costumes but also in other folkloric events from southern Kyushu to the South-West Islands, including Amami. This suggests that such comparison with the folkloric cultures of the minorities in marginal regions will encourage rereading of abundant folkloric events accumulated in Japanese folklore studies, paving the way for comparative folklore with the potential to explain the diversity of cultures in the Japanese archipelago. This article is one of these practices.

Key words: Amami, Laos, Camiguin, one-stitch dropping, sawtooth pattern, mosquito net, prevention of evil