What is the Principle of Transmission of Denshō (Tradition) : Case of Hiba Kōjin Kagura

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The concept of denshō (tradition) has been central in the study of Japanese folklore, serving as the basis for establishing the study. This paper analyses Hiba Kōjin Kagura Performance in Hiroshima Prefecture as a case study to consider what tradition is and examine what keeps it alive. This kagura is dedicated in worship of Kōjin as a chief deity and performed in units called “myō,” a group of several households. Once every 13 or 33 years, people conduct a large scale kagura, which in old times was performed for four days & nights and ended in a trance. That was a highly secret ritual held without any outsiders present and aimed at granting wishes to local people. This paper examines changes in a large scale kagura in Tōjō Town and Saijō Town (currently Shōbara City) in which the author has been intermittently involved since 1977. While reviewing the process of changes, continuity and discontinuity, the paper investigates the reality of tradition: how the long-cycle tradition of the kagura has been kept active. The kagura significantly changed in the 1960s, when it was designated as a cultural property. People had performed the kagura only casually until then, but they gradually became conscious of being “watched” as they were evaluated from outside, and the results of folklore research and studies started to contribute back to the community. Although Kōjin Kagura had been kept strictly secret, once visitors were allowed to see it, it became susceptible to external interventions, such as memorial events, recording, and preservation projects, and the trend among governments and non-profit foundations to make records and give public performances was accelerating. Thus, oral tradition and bodily techniques have become tangible by being documented in writing and recorded on film. The documents have been used as “resources” to produce new interpretations while films have transformed the performance into a new work, sometimes creating misunderstanding. Kagura in particular has a strong tendency that new meanings are added and transformations are made by documents, photos, and films. Moreover, it is frequently performed out of the context as it is used by governments and education systems. These tendencies, however, can also be a driving force to keep tradition alive. This paper is aimed at theorizing complicated movements concerned with tradition by considering them in relation to the intervention of folklorists, designation as a cultural property, and appropriation of films.

Key words: denshō (tradition), kagura, transmission, cultural property, television pictures