Nebuta (including both “Neputa” and “Nebuta”) is festivals held at the beginning of August every year in different parts of the Tsugaru Region in Aomori Prefecture. In these festivals, bands of participants parade newly constructed floats made of wood, bamboo, and paper at night.

Nebuta has become famous even outside of Japan, attracting many tourists. Although it originated in the Tanabata, Nemuri Nagashi, or Bon Festival, Nebuta always entailed quarrels, fights, and brawls from the early modern to the modern times. This folk custom is called “Kenka Neputa” and is analyzed in this paper.

Kenka Neputa is a brawl resulted from an encounter between floats paraded by young and adult men from different towns. Although it seemed to have been uncontrolled, it has been revealed that there were some traditional codes and ritual elements in such fights. In modern times, Kenka Neputa died out in urban areas because of stronger control of Nebuta, but some elements, such as stone throwing and fighting music, had survived up to recent years in rural areas.

In urban areas, children floats, whose origin dates back to the early modern period, were prohibited, and floats paraded down main streets were brought under joint control in order to prevent fights. As a result, Nebuta teams shifted their focus to how to win a festival-wide float competition, creating larger floats and marching in columns. In recent years, Nebuta has become increasingly diversified in the form of floats and the style of participants. As these changes have caused some accidents, a movement is growing among local people to bring Nebuta back to its “traditional” or “authentic” form.

This analysis, however, reveals that the form and style of floats valued in competitions or considered as “traditional” were created from brawls and violations and established as standards after the early modern period. Therefore, the grounds for solving current problems, or the “authentic forms” contemporary people are longing for as common standards, are not definite but subject to changes over time.

Key words: Neputa, Nebuta, festivals, Tanabata, stone throwing, fights, quarrels, violations, tradition, standards