Discourses upon Eisa in Okinawa, as a contemporary urban fakelore

Harumichi YAMADA
Tokyo Keizai University
yamada@tku.ac.jp

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Eisa is a type of dance performance popular in Okinawa, Japan, originally rooted in Buddhist Bon Festival traditions, and believed to have a long history of several hundreds of years. Contemporary Eisa, however, experienced radical changes in varied ways in the latter half of the 20th century.

It is widely acknowledged that contemporary Eisa has developed its styles through formal competitions started after the WWII. The first “All Island Eisa Competition” (全島エイサーコンクール), organized in then Koza city in 1956, was a pivotal event in contemporary Eisa history. Since then, Eisa has diffused all over Okinawa prefecture, and varied new elements have flown into Eisa related performances. Many elements from traditional folkloric performances have been deconstructed, almost annihilating original contexts, and organized into a systematic “fakelore” performance. In such processes, bravery or gallantry is often emphasized in discourses upon Eisa performances.

Okinawa City authority has published “the declaration of Eisa town” (エイサーのまち宣言) in 2007. Since then the City more often encourages local efforts to make Eisa related elements visible in its urban landscape, through setting landmarks, street furniture, and other constructions decorated with Eisa related symbols. In the declaration, gallantry of energetic youth is praised in poetic manners.

Historical Eisa should have been something afar from gallantry, but a ritual of worship to ancestors based on Buddhist belief. It should have been less sophisticated, less organized, and less noisy, when compared with its modern counterpart. Orientation towards gallantry of contemporary Eisa might have its roots in post-WWII situations in Okinawa, where the occupational US military controlled the Ryukyus, and prevailed over Okinawan people to obey.

Festival frenzy around contemporary Eisa might have been a substation for resistance action of the local people against the mighty dominating power, thus the result of the occupational past, and on-going presence of US military bases.