CASE STUDY 25

Community members revitalizing a New Year Ritual in Japan

Sanbasomawashi (New Year’s Performance) is a votive art form in Tokushima, Kagawa and Ehime Prefectures of Japan, dating back to the Edo and Showa periods. Two performers — a wooden doll puppeteer and a drummer — visit homes on New Year’s Day with Sanbaso and Ebisu wooden dolls in two wooden boxes.

After hanging strips of white paper to appease evil deities, four wooden dolls are manipulated to invoke prayers for bumper crops, sound health, the welfare of families, success in business and bright prospects for the New Year.

From the second half of the 1960s onwards, the frequency of Sanbasomawashi performances declined rapidly. Retiring performers had no successors in urban areas of the region and by the 1970s, performers were mainly found in mountainous areas and farming villages. This was a period of rapid change in commerce and agriculture, high economic growth and rapid urbanization in Japan. Sanbasomawashi, practised by members of a marginalized community, was also negatively affected by discrimination against this community.

#### A research initiative and community intervention

In the 1990s Tsujimoto Kazuhide, who had conducted a research survey on the performing arts of marginalized groups of people in Tokushima Prefecture, organized a society aimed at reviving and transmitting Sanbasomawashi by transmitting performance techniques and the custom of performing it from door to door. As a result of this initiative, in 1999 a Sanbasomawashi performer accepted a new apprentice: Nakauchi Masako. She accompanied the performer from door to door during his performances and studied his technique. Since then, she has been able to practise and transmit this performing art together with other members of the society.

The performers have been inspired by their enthusiastic reception in door-to-door performances on or after New Year’s Day in which they deliver prayers for bumper crops, success in business, sound health and the welfare of families. Young people have shown a willingness to become fieldworkers, interview elderly people and gain direct exposure to Sanbasomawashi. In this way, they have come to value and safeguard this traditional performing art.

The ‘Awadeko Sanbasomawashi Densho Hozon Katsudo (Preservation Activities [for the Sanbasomawashi Ritual])’ project was awarded a prize in the 2008 Asia/Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO (ACCU) Contest for Better Practices in Communities’ Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Revitalization.

For further information on the element, see:

http://www.accu.or.jp/ich/en/community/sanbaso.html

For further information on the contest (and other examples), see:

http://www.accu.or.jp/ich/en/community/index.html