

1. Background to the activity

The objective of the "Regional Sociology Seminar" (a class for 2nd years at the Department of International Cultural Studies at Morioka Junior College) is to plan and implement a project in the region and to learn from it in a form of service learning. In line with this objective, this year's class participated in the festival float procession (September 13th to 16th, 2023) of the Morioka Autumn Festival (Morioka Hachimangu Festival) carried out by "Megumi" (Morioka City Fire Brigade 2nd Division) from Nataya-cho, Morioka, with whom I have been involved for many years. This was the first time Megumi had participated in the float procession in seven years. Through participant observation, we considered the relationship between the fire brigade, the local community, and the autumn festival, and what we can learn from it in relation to solving local issues.

2. Progress of the activity

(1) Preparing for the Festival in the classroom and through field work

The students first studied the broad outline of Japanese local communities in the "Regional Sociology" class in addition to learning the basics of qualitative social research in the "Local Community Research Methods" class in the first semester of the second year. They then participated in a voluntary study of the Festival during the summer break. There were 6 participants, all second-year students (three male, three female) from the Department of International Cultural Studies, and the reading materials were reports from previous seminars (compiled by the Department of International Cultural Studies, Morioka Junior College, Iwate Prefectural University, 2016), a report paper written by myself (Misuda 2017), and a book by sociologist Makoto Matsudaira (1980). Matsudaira's book is a useful reference for both getting an overview of local festivals and for writing reports.

In addition to classroom learning, students also participated in "ondoage" practices held at the second floor of the Daijiji Area Community Center starting in mid-June 2023. Ondoage is an activity where people sing words of thanks to the houses and companies that have donated to the float in a 7, 7, 7, 5 morae pattern in time with a unique melody, that is said have originated as a work song. Practices for ondoage were held a few times before Obon (A Japanese festival to commemorate the spirits of one's ancestors) and almost every day for around two hours in the afternoon after Obon until the Festival. Apart

from the students, five to six people participated in each of the practices, though it depended on the day. There were a mix of ages, with some elementary school students participating at times. Most had experience participating in the Festival in a different group and the Iwate Prefectural University students were the only ones to be participating in the Festival for the first time.

There was one female student who wished to play kodaiko (small drums) instead of ondoage and she participated in the kodaiko lessons held near the Daijiji Area Community Center. Kodaiko is mostly played by elementary school students but she seemed to build a close rapport with the elementary students from during practice to the actual day of the Festival. Ideally, it would have been good to have the students involved in the creation of the float and the dolls but because the structure differed from last time and some communication issues arose, students were not involved in the creation of the float nor the dolls.

We engaged in participant observation of preparations up to the day of the Festival but some students contracted COVID-19 and were unable to spend enough time observing. Two students were ill on the day of the Festival and were unable to participate.

(2) Day of the Festival

Because the 2023 Festival was the first Festival to be held after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, 10 floats participated this year from all over Morioka City. As a result, the number of participants in Megumi was around 200 people compared to the 300 participants in the 2015 Megumi float procession. Around 30 to 50 of the 200 participants were children.

Here are some of the intriguing changes from the last Megumi float procession that were observed (*).

[Allowing women to participate and the following backlash]

Megumi was the first group to allow women to play the odaiko (large drums) in the 1960s. Until then, the odaiko, as well as the kodaiko could only be played by boys. As a contextual factor to the change, the group was running short of people to play. Some women speaking up about wanting to play, and the hope of the organizers was that seeing women participate would encourage men to participate as well. The head of the brigade gave permission for women to participate for these



Students engaging in ondoage

reasons. It is indicative of the changing times, as well as the level of authority the head of the brigade has.

Even today, "hyoshigi-uchi" (clanking two pieces of wood (hyoshigi) together rhythmically) is considered a male-only activity. But in the Nataya-cho parade (where the float walks through the main street of Nataya-cho) held in the afternoon of the fourth day of the Festival (September 16), a young woman who was playing the large drums decided to play the hyoshigi. This was not necessarily because she wanted to just have fun, but because it felt like most things were allowed during this parade (This was one of the reasons the students and I were able to sing many ondo during this parade even though we were not very good.) But this woman who was playing the hyoshigi came under harsh criticism from some of the other women who had been participating in the ondoage for the way she was handling the hyoshigi and mistakes made in etiquette, and she broke out in tears during the parade. What can be surmised from the remarks from the women who were critical was that they had also wanted to play hyoshigi when they were young but gave it up because their parents said that it was not for girls. There seems to have been dissatisfaction about the younger generation disrupting traditional norms, and issues with the "anything goes" policy of the Megumi not being communicated to all members. I hope to keep an eye on how this issue of deep gender subtexts develops.

[Kasakoshi and economizing]

The "kasakoshi" (afterparty) was held on September 16, the last day of the Festival. In previous iterations of the Festival, a large afterparty was held on a separate day at a hotel for example (the Morioka Grande Hotel in 2015). But this time, a simple afterparty was held at the Hamato Hall at Morioka Machiya Monogatarikan with delivered party foods. The primary reason for this change was the difficulty the organizers had in gathering donations from companies. According to Mr. I, the amount of company donations this year was half of what they received in 2015. Part of the reason for this decline appears to be the large number of floats (10 floats) that were going around this year. However, in addition, in response to complaints from citizens about the requests for donations for floats, Megumi had decided to stop going around houses asking for donations. For these reasons, the afterparty was held with frugality in mind and participation fees were set higher than previous years (previously 6000 yen). That's why the drinks that come with the lunches during the Festival "are carbonated liquor drinks instead of beer and the quality of bento boxes has gone down," said Mr. I. This was echoed in the complaints heard from participants. The parties entertaining the float procession also seemed to be on a tighter budget, and participants were disappointed that the fish monger, who had in previous years provided sashimi when the float came to rest at their shop, no longer did so this year.

Mr. I pointed out that there are challenges in passing down the knowledge of these financial management difficulties and their workarounds to the next generation, much as there are for the creation of the floats. He believes Megumi needs to think about how to communicate knowledge to younger generations about where to go and which route to take to receive donations, and

which places are always waiting for the float to come around (e.g., senior citizens' homes).

There were many challenges to this year's float procession compared to previous years. However, Mr. I also said, "Money moves when people move. The Festival benefits the community. And most of all, participating in the Festival with a float as Megumi is fun." He added, "The Festival is an offering for the shrine, first and foremost, but there always is a social element to it. It's good fun, getting together and doing things... That's what makes a society." With this in mind, Mr. I questioned the wisdom of having a policy that is too strict.

(3) Additional research, participation in the Ondo Research Group, and fieldwork presentation

After the Festival, we decided to participate in the Morioka Dashi Ondo Research Group that participants told us about during the Festival. This Group was established by Kichinosuke Ito, with the objective of addressing the challenge of the words of the ondoage being difficult to decipher for the average listener. They practice twice a month at the Tōryō Welfare Center for the Aged and a total of around 10 people, relatively young as well as experienced, participate. This group does not try to standardize the ondo with "correct" version and respects the diversity in the way each division sings it. Students who were not able to participate on the day of the Festival, engaged in participant observation and research of this group.

Additional research was conducted on relevant parties after the Festival. On the afternoon of March 15, 2024, we held a fieldwork presentation at the second floor of the Daijiji Area Community Center in which around 30 people including the head of the division participated. I felt anxious that a report by students may not be new or exciting to the people of the community, but the presentation was well-received, with head of the division Mr. O, commenting that, "It was a good opportunity to learn what young people are thinking and to talk about what is necessary for passing on traditions" with others suggesting that a similar presentation be conducted for other divisions.

3. Future activities

The challenge going forward for this project is how to keep this activity alive even after the students graduate from the junior college. The key will be to figure out a way to communicate the experience to incoming students and to build a mechanism by which students can continue to be involved with the local community after graduation. There is a group in Nataya-cho called the Morioka Young People Project that I hope to collaborate with to produce positive and proactive outcomes in students' education and revitalize the local community.

※The passage in (2) is an excerpt from the report edited by Yosinobu Misuda Lab, Iwate Prefectural University Morioka, Junior College, 2024, "2023 'Seminar on Community Sociology' Report"

Bibliography Edited by the Department of International Cultural Studies, Iwate Prefectural University, Morioka Junior College, 2016, "2015 'Seminar on Understanding Local Culture' Report"
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