Artistic Weight Lifting KANTOU: Tradition and Acculturation

Sayaka Hashimoto

*Doctoral Program in Human Sciences, Waseda University
2-579-15, Mikajima Tokorozawa, Saitama 359-1192 Japan
saya.hashimoto@ruri.waseda.jp
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Focusing on the Kanto Skill Contest in Akita, this study intends to clarify the process of making the Kanto performance a competitive event and discuss how this traditional event has changed during the process. The Kanto-kai (Kanto Society) was founded in 1931 with the aim of improving skill in the Kanto performance. In the same year, the annual Myogi-kai (Kanto Skill Contest) started. At first, there were no established scoring rules for the contest, and scoring for Kanto performances depended mainly on the subjective judgment of the contest judges. Eventually, as the Kanto gradually became known throughout Japan to the extent that Kanto Festival came to attract tourists from not only Akita but also various other prefectures, scoring rules were established. In 1980, the Kanto event was designated as a national important intangible folk cultural heritage. This led to an expansion of the scale of the contest and created a gap between people’s understanding of the Kanto as a representative folk event in Japan and then the state of the Kanto which was in the process of transforming into a competitive event. As long as the Kanto remains competitive, its traditional aspect may figure less prominently than it has in the past. Through an examination of their policies, this study has revealed how the Kanto Society has dealt with such problems in order to maintain the Kanto tradition.

Keywords: KANTO, competition, tourism

1. Introduction

The Kanto Festival, one of the three great festivals that are held in the Tohoku (Northeastern) District, is held in Akita City, Akita Prefecture every August, and it is widely known for the beauty to its Kanto, a long bamboo pole with many lighted lanterns, which sways to and fro against the dark night sky. Incorporating old festivals and annual events observed in Akita, the Kanto was established under its present name and form in 1992. The current form of the Kanto Festival has integrated the Neburi-nagashi (an event to "sweep drowsiness away"), Tanabata (star festival), Honen-sai (harvest festival), and O-bon (festival for the repose of ancestral spirits). Traditionally, the Kanto was celebrated at night. Considering the continuously growing number of tourists, however, the scale of the Kanto Festival has been expanded in recent years to include a day-time performance of Kanto as well as the addition of other events. In this study on the Kanto Festival, the focus is on the Myogi-kai, the Kanto Skill Contest. The nature of the contest has changed during the course of its development since the first Myogi-kai was held in 1931, the year when the Kanto Society was founded, to the present day. Based on information collected from an interview survey conducted in February, 2005, this study has reconstructed the process of the change in the Kanto Skill Contest. Except for items marked otherwise, all of the material appearing in the text of this paper is based on information obtained through fieldwork. Throughout this paper, a pseudonym is used for the informant, a Kanto Society administrator.

1 The Myogikai (Skill Contest) was originally called the Kyogikai (Skill Competition) from 1931 through 1955. According to Kanto Society administrator N, the old name was changed because “competition” could give the wrong impression of the traditional folk event.
2. Overview of the study region

The Kanto Festival is held in Akita City, which is located roughly in the center of Akita Prefecture. The city faces the Sea of Japan to the west, while the Ohu Mountain Range extends to the east. It has a total land area of 460.10 square kilometers and hosted a population of 318,017 at the time this survey was carried out in 2004. Originally, the lord of Kubota Castle, Yoshinobu Satake, constructed the central part of the city of where the castle located, sometime between 1607 and 1612 after he had moved into Akita from Mito on the orders of the shogunate. Across the Asahi River, on the east side of the castle, was the residential area for the warrior class. The residential area set aside for commoners was located to the west side of the castle. The east side, where the warrior class lived, was called Uchi-machi, while the west side, where the tradesmen and craftsmen lived, was called To-machi. To the west of To-machi was Tera-machi, the location of a temple. Kanto Street (from the Sanno crossroad up to the bridge located in the 2nd block), the site for Night Kanto, is located in To-machi, where the Kanto was first created and gradually developed. (Akita Kanto Festival Center, 2003)

3. Kanto Festival

3.1. History of Kanto Festival

Referring to the Kanto no Hon ("Book of Kanto" by Hotta, 1995), Kanto 70 nen, Neburinagashi e no Omi ("Engaged in Kanto for 70 years; Hommage for Neburinagashi" by Hotta, 2001), and Akita no Kanto, Tanabata, Neburinagashi ("Events of Akita—Kanto, Tanabata, and Neburinagashi" published by the Akita Kanto Festival Center, 2003), the history of the Kanto Festival is presented as follows:

The origin of the Kanto is thought to be the Neburinagashi, which adopted the concept of the Takatoro, a garden lantern that was originally used for O-bon, as a light to welcome the ancestral spirits. The Takatoro lantern used to be hung in the garden. In order to convert this into a portable lantern, the dwarf bamboo that had been used for the lantern legs was replaced by longer bamboo. The number of lanterns attached to bamboo rods, which were bound to a main pole, gradually increased until the current form of the Kanto was established. This account of the origin of the Kanto is the most supportable of the various accounts available to researchers. It is said that the Kanto performers used to compete in strength, not technique, at the time when they gradually began attaching an increasingly large number of lanterns onto the Kanto poles which they carried and displayed in a parade. After wax candles became available to commoners in 1751, the Kanto event began to be mentioned in various writings, such as Yuki no Furu Michi ("The Snowy Road"), a travelogue written by Soan Tsumura in 1789. The present official name of the event, Kanto, was first used by Tetsusaku Okubo in 1881, when he suggested the idea of entertaining the Meiji Emperor with the Kanto performance to those who were in charge of hosting the Emperor during his visit to Akita. In 1872, the lunar calendar was replaced by the solar calendar. As a result, organizers of the annual Kanto event, which had traditionally been observed on July 6th by the lunar calendar, were compelled to hold it nearly one month earlier. Unfortunately, July 6th on the solar calendar falls during the rainy season. Due to rain-related problems and the change of the event site from To-machi to Uchi-machi in 1903, to take advantage of newly-laid electric wires, the number of Kanto, which had been about 50 in 1900, had undergone a dramatic reduction to 4 or 5 by 1905. This reduction placed the survival of the event in jeopardy. However, the visit of the future emperor, Emperor Taisho, who was entertained by the Kanto performance in 1908 and the appearance in 1909 of advertisements on the lanterns for a soft drink factory in Akita helped to revitalize the Kanto event. In 1900, in order to avoid the rainy season, the lunar calendar was once again adopted for the Kanto event. This contributed to a minimizing of the weather problem and, therefore, contributed to attracting visitors from other prefectures. As the number of visitors increased, the management of the event was thoroughly reviewed, and, as a result,
the Kanto Society was founded in 1931. Owing to the contribution of the Kanto Society, the event was run in a more organized way and the first Kanto Skill Contest was held. Due to World War II, the Kanto event was discontinued in 1938 and not held again for 8 years. It was resumed after the war. In 1953, the Kanto was performed during the Nissenren Convention held in Niigata. After this, through the growing number of opportunities to perform Kanto outside Akita, the Kanto event became widely known throughout Japan. As it became more and more famous, both the duration of the festival and the number of events in the Kanto Skill Contest increased, as did the invitations to the Kanto performers to participate in grand events in Japan and abroad, such as the National Athletic Meet and the Olympics. Gradually, the management of the Kanto event became too complex for the Kanto Society to handle all of the responsibilities on its own. In 1966, the Kanto Festival Executive Committee was established to support the Kanto Society. When the Kanto event was designated as an intangible cultural heritage of Akita, the Kanto Festival Executive Committee was placed in charge of the operation of the Kanto Festival, while the Kanto Society was given charge of the Kanto event. Triggered by the first Kanto performance overseas in San Diego, USA, in 1976, the Kanto began to be performed in various countries. Since the Kanto event was designated as a national important intangible folk cultural heritage in 1980, the Kanto Society has engaged in a variety of activities aimed at carrying on the tradition and promoting tourism.

The date and duration of the Kanto Festival has changed during the course of the long history of the Festival. The duration was prolonged to 3 days, from August 5th to 7th, in the years from 1966 to 1987, and to 4 days, from August 4th to 7th, in the years from 1988 to 2000. From 2001 to the present, the Festival has been held over a period of 4 days, from August 3rd to 6th. According to Mr. N, a Kanto Society administrator, the Festival dates have changed in consideration of the dates of the Tanabata Festival in Sendai and the Nebuta Festival in Aomori, which are held around this time, so that the Kanto Festival would have a better chance a being included in package tours organized by travel agencies.

3.2. Organization

The Kanto Society and the Kanto Festival Executive Committee manage the Kanto Festival. The Kanto Society is in charge of the rules for the Kanto Skill Contest and responsible for carrying on the tradition, while the Kanto Festival Executive Committee is in charge of the general operation of the Festival and the management of the spectator seats for the tourist from other prefectures. The Kanto Society consists of participating teams—37 Town Kanto teams and 33 Work Kanto teams (including schools and government offices) in 2005. The administrative body of the Kanto Society consists of 19 representatives from 37 participating towns. The administrators are only chosen from the Town Kanto, not the Work Kanto. Basically, work teams are allowed to participate on the condition that they accept all of what has been decided by the Kanto Society. The administrators have a term limit of 2 years by the Kanto Society regulation. In actuality, however, those who were chosen as administrators through the recommendation of Society members have tended to remain in the position until they

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4 Nissenren is the abbreviated name for the Federation of Japan Specialty Store Association, which is an association of retailers established as a countermeasure against department stores. The association consists of 11 local associations in the following blocks, Hokkaido, Tohoku, Tokyo, Hokuriku, Chubu, Tokai, Kinki, Chugoku, Shikoku, and Kyushu, and 110 single units. Once a year, Nissenren holds a national convention for the exchange of information. It is held in a different city each year. At the 1953 National Convention in Niigata, an event called the Nissenren Parade was held in hope of boosting the economy for retailers. Representatives from a variety of local festivals from all over Japan participated in the Parade. Later, the Parade was also held at other conventions in Kobe, Sendai, and Sapporo (Hotta 1995).

5 In 2005, the Four Great Festivals in Tohoku were the Nebuta in Aomori, held on August 2-7, the Hanagasa in Yamagata, held on August 5-7, the Tanabata in Sendai, held on August 6-8, and the Kanto in Akita.

6 The names of the towns used in the Kanto Festival are different from the present town names. Yoshinobu Satake developed the present Akita City from 1607 to 1629, during which names were given to towns in the area. In 1965, these towns were renamed and administrative boundaries were rearraanged. But the Kanto Society allowed the Kanto teams from such towns to use their old names and to follow the old administrative boundaries. The teams, which have adopted the town names that were used in To-machi, the birthplace of the Kanto event, are called the Town Kanto Teams. The administrative boundaries for the old towns are applied in sorting the Town Kanto Teams. Teams from towns, which started to participate in the Kanto event in the Meiji or Showa Eras, use the town names that were used at the time of their first participation.
reached retirement age at 70, regardless of the term limit. The regulations were revised when the electoral system was introduced into the Society for the first time in 2004. Under the revised regulations, administrators are elected from a list of candidates; the retirement age system has been abolished; and the term limit for administrators has been set at 3 years. Those who were serving as administrators at the time of the revision of the regulations in 2004 were regarded as candidates for the next election, unless they withdrew their candidacy, and only those elected continue to serve as administrators. The Kanto Society aims to preserve and carry on the tradition of Kanto and to cooperate with Akita Prefecture and City in the development of tourism. In order to achieve the aim, the Kanto Society, according to Society regulations, holds the Kanto Festival and the Kanto Skill Contest, gives suitable advice on performing skills, devices, and costumes, advertises the event, invites tourists to experience the Kanto and arranges the participation of the Kanto performers in various events in and out of Akita (Akita City Kanto Society Regulations 1998).

The Kanto Festival Executive Committee, which is under the authority of the Commerce and Tourism Division of Akita City, serves to operate events except for the Kanto Skill Contest, manage the spectator seating, and sell contest tickets. The Tourist Association and the Kanto Society cooperated in the management of the Festival from 1954 to 1966. Due to an increase in the number of Kanto poles, spectators and traffic problems, the Kanto Festival Executive Committee was established in 1966. The Committee was comprised of the police, press, power utilities, transportation industries, hotels, stores and delegates from among the residents of Akita (Hotta 1995). The Mayor of Akita City served as the president of the Committee in 2003.

3.3. Kanto Skill Contest

The Kanto Skill Contest, which is also called the Daytime Kanto, consists of 6 competitive categories, O(big)-waka group routine performances, group free performances, individual performances, Ko(small)-waka group performances, festival music performances, and Ko-waka music performances. The number of participating groups or individuals in each category is limited, so the participants in each category have to clear a preliminary round in order to advance to the contest held on the last day of the festival. There are 5 techniques to be judged — nagashi (passing), hirate (palm), hitai (forehead), kata (shoulder), and koshi (lower back). Performing groups, each consisting of 5 members, demonstrates these 5 techniques, one at a time. The contest for festival music performance started in 1989, and for the Ko-waka music performance in 2005. In the music contest, the participant is required to perform accompanying music for the nagashi skill and for the Kanto Festival. The music is composed by the Kanto Society and scored by the judges. The Night Kanto has its own categories, Chu(middle)-waka performances by participants whose age is between O-waka and Ko-waka, and the Yo(smallest)-waka performances for the participants whose age is below the Ko-waka. The size and height of the Kanto and the number of lanterns are regulated according to the categories shown in Table 1 (Fukuda, 2004).

In addition to the above, there are the Town Kanto of the Town Kanto Society that retain the town crests, the Work Kanto that stemmed from recreational activities at work and the Commercial Kanto which show sponsor advertisements on the Kanto lanterns.

3.3.1. Changes in the Kanto Skill Contest

Aiming at "improving the skill of the Kanto Society as a whole by showing the Society members’ skills to the public and studying each other’s skill" (Hotta, 1995:173), the Kanto Skill Contest was instituted. In the first Kanto Skill Contest, 7 judges walked among the performers to score each performance, instead of adopting the time-limit system that is now in use, and the rating was decided by totaling the scores given by the judges. In the second contest, in celebration of the completion of work on a national road, 3 areas of the road were used as contest sites; the first area was used as the venue for the forehead skill competition, the second area for the shoulder skill competition and

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7 The 2005 festival was called the Folkloric Performance Art Festival, in which various folklore arts from Akita such as Namahage-daiko, Nishimonai Bon-odori, Haneken Bayashi, and Yatose Akita Festival were presented during the Kanto event.
8 The numbers of the teams that survived the preliminary Kanto Skill Contest in 2004 were as follows. The O-waka Group Routine: 16, The O-waka Group Free: 8, The O-waka Individual Routine: 10, and the Music Performance: 8. There was no preliminary contest for the Ko-waka.
the third area for the lower back skill competition. After this, the contest was discontinued due to World War II. It restarted in 1947. Because the contest was held outdoors, performances could be affected by weather conditions such as wind, which made fair grading difficult. Every year, numerous complaints were made about grading. This resulted in separating the contest from the Kanto Festival and holding it in tournaments, including the Ko-waka, in the newly-built Sanno Gymnasium in September, 1954. Highly advanced skills were required to win the tournament in the gymnasium where there was no wind. The rules became stricter and all the participants were required to perform with one hand only. Time-limits were also set: 40 seconds for the passing skill, and 50 seconds each for the palm, forehead, shoulder, and the lower back skills. Participants were asked to perform within a circle 6 meters in diameter. The contest contributed to establishing the pass, palm, forehead, shoulder, and lower back skills as the basic Kanto skills and to improving these techniques. In 1959, a category for individuals was also included in the Kanto Skill Contest in order to encourage people to master all the five techniques\(^9\). The indoor contest, which lasted until 1967, however, was less exciting because of the inevitable restrictions in the performance. Since 1968, therefore, the contest has taken place outdoors, on Nakadobashi Street on the last day of the Kanto Festival. In addition to the routine performance, the free performance started in 1968. The participants began to enjoy performing freely, wearing decorative bamboo hats and high clogs, and to compete in the number and height of Tsugitake, extension poles\(^10\). Compared to earlier days, the Kanto has apparently developed dramatically, regarding improvement in skill, the initial purpose of the Kanto Skill Contest. When the Skill Contest started, there were no routine performances and few participants used as many extension poles as now for their Kanto. The increase in the number of extension poles for Kanto is due to the improvement not only in Sashite\(^11\) or performers’ skills, but also in the devices. Extension poles for Kanto used to be made only from bamboo, but are now also made from stainless steel, which is light, workable, and strong. Due to limitations in the material, it is impossible to use more than 3 or 4 bamboo extension poles, while 5 or 6 extension poles can be used if they are made from stainless steel. Some teams attempt to strengthen their Kanto even further by stuffing in the center of the bamboo poles with cedar (Akita Kanto Festival Center 2003: 34). It has not been very long since the Kanto Skill Contest became as seriously competitive as it is now. Though O-waka group routine performance championships started in 1931, there were only simple awards for skillful teams and individual participants in other categories in those days. It

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\(^9\) Hodonoteppo Town won the championship in the group performance 6 times during the 9 years from 1954 to 1963. Seeing this, the other towns who participated in the group performance contest complained, which resulted in establishing a new rule that winners in the individual performance contest were not allowed to participate in the group contest. Since 1973, however, winners in the individual performance contest have been allowed to perform in the group performance contest as they had been before.

\(^10\) The extension pole is a 120 cm pole that can be attached to a main bamboo Kanto pole to make it higher. In the Kanto Skill Contest, a performer is to add a new extension pole to the main pole when he receives the Kanto from the participant who has performed immediately before him.

\(^11\) Sashite refers to a Kanto performer.

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Table 1  Kanto Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Height</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Height of Lantern</th>
<th>Total Number of Lanterns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O-waka (Senior High School students)</td>
<td>12m</td>
<td>50kg</td>
<td>64cm</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chu-waka (Junior High School students)</td>
<td>9m</td>
<td>30kg</td>
<td>48cm</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ko-waka (Elementary School pupils, 4 graders and over)</td>
<td>7m</td>
<td>15kg</td>
<td>48cm</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yo-waka (3 graders and below)</td>
<td>5m</td>
<td>5kg</td>
<td>30cm</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
was after 1990 that the Kanto event began to draw a growing degree of attention. According to Kanto Society administrator N, judging of the Kanto performers started when JR East Japan, NHK, and Akita Broadcasting Corporation began presenting a championship flag and trophy. The festival music performance was included in the Kanto Skill Contest category in 1989. Music performers’ participation in the contest drew further attention to the Kanto event. This has resulted in an ongoing increase in the number of participants and sponsors.

3.3.2. Rules for the Kanto Skill Contest

The Kanto Skill Contest consists of a preliminary and a final, both with different judges. 14 members of the Kanto Society serve as the judges for the preliminary contest, while 7 prominent local figures serve as the judges for the final. Participating teams and individuals perform one by one in an order decided by lot and are scored by judges. Winners are selected according to score. Only the O-waka group routine performance is a knockout competition, in which participating groups perform two by two in an order decided by lot and compete with each other in skill in passing, palm, forehead, shoulder, and lower back, in that order. Participants for the individual Kanto performance compete in all these techniques except for passing. The event of free performance is for O-waka groups only, and all the other events require routine performances. The biggest differences between the free and the routine are that, in the free, there is no limit on the number of extension poles and that each performer is allowed to wear a decorative bamboo hats and use decorative bamboo known as Matoi. Each performance is presented within a circle of 6 meters in diameter for a certain number of seconds as regulated by category. The maximum score for each event is 10 — the maximum score for group performances is 50, and 40 for individual performances. A point-deduction, not point-addition, scoring system is used. Deduction is applied in such cases: the Kanto falls down; the participant fails to perform within the time-limit; performances are not presented in the correct order; the participant uses two hands during the performance; and the participant steps outside of the 6-meter circle. As for the grading for the free performance, a score for expression is added to the score for the routine performance and a total score is used for competition. For the expression score, the number of extension poles, design of the bamboo hat and decorative bamboo, and performance with high clogs are evaluated. The 2004 rule book for the free Kanto scoring states that, "Scoring for the design of bamboo hats, the number of extension poles, and the height of clogs etc. shall be left to the discretion of the judge." While this apparently indicates people’s trust in the judges, participants are not always satisfied with such scoring based upon the judge’s subjective view.

4. Discussion—Kanto Skill Contest and Tourism

Aiming to upgrade skills in the Kanto, the Kanto Society has made great efforts since 1931 when the Kanto Skill Contest started. Earlier, while various towns had worked separately toward improving Kanto skill, their standards and instruction were not standardized. The Kanto Skill Contest has

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12 The judges for the final contest in 2003 were the vice president of the Akita Preservation Society for Cultural Properties, the vice president of the Akita Convention & Visitors Bureau, the chief of the Cultural Affairs Department of the Akita Sakigake Shimpō, the Councilor of the Akita Television Services Bureau, the vice president of Akita Gymnastics Association, the standing director of the Akita Gymnastics Association, and the chairman of the Local Performing Art Division of the Akita Senior High School Cultural Federation. In 2002 a 2-hour workshop on the Kanto Skill Contest judging was held for the judges of the year on August 1st.

13 In the judging for the routine performance contest, the highest and the lowest scores awarded by the judges are excluded when contestants are ranked.

14 Kanto skills: The performer of the Nagashi or the Passing Skill lifts a Kanto upright with one hand when signaled by the sound of a whistle, holds it still in his palm for 5-7 seconds, lowers the Kanto by 15-20 cm by sliding it down between the thumb and fingers, and then holds it still. At the sound of the next whistle signal, the performer of Hirate or the Palm Skill adds a new pole to the Kanto, lifts the Kanto upright in his palm, lowers it between the thumb and fingers at the next signal, and passes it to the performer of Hitai or the Forehead Skill. The performer of each of the Forehead, Shoulder, and Lower Back Skills receives the Kanto with one hand, holds it still in his palm for a short period (2-3 seconds), lowers it between the thumb and fingers, holds it on the forehead (or shoulder or lower back) for a while, lifts it from the forehead (or shoulder or lower back) and passes it to the next performer.

15 Time-limits: for the O-waka Group Performance, 30 second for the performance of each skill; for the Ko-waka Group Performance, 20 seconds for the performance of each skill; for the O-waka Individual, 20 seconds for the performance of each skill. The time limit for each skill shall be 10 seconds longer when performed indoors.
contributed to the unification and systemization of the Kanto and to an upgrading of skills. After the wartime discontinuation of the Kanto, the event was resumed and gradually gained back its popularity. The Kanto performance at the Nissenren Convention made people throughout Japan familiar with the event. Since then, the Kanto event has become an aspect of tourism. Kanto performances presented in other prefectures and countries not only serve as the effective advertisement of the Kanto event, but also give the inter-town participants good opportunities to see each other’s performances, which used to be possible but only once a year at the annual Kanto Festival. The increase in opportunities to see performances by those who are from other areas in the town has been effective in improving Kanto skills.

The Kanto event was designated as a national important intangible folk cultural heritage in 1980, which affected the consciousness of Kanto performers. Their pride in their own festival is connoted in such remarks as, "We are participating in the Kanto of Akita, a national important intangible cultural heritage" (Hotta 2001:29); "Compared with numerous other festivals, the Kanto Festival is unique. It is beyond a mere parade, dancing, or a ceremony. It is a festival of art and skill, in which a man’s strength and skill are tested, and the delicate beauty of balance is appreciated." (Hotta 1995:170) More than anytime in the past, the Kanto Society became conscious of the importance of carrying on this tradition and began to be committed to the training of successors and to solidifying cooperative ties with the tourism industry. With the designation of the Kanto event as a national important intangible folk cultural heritage, there rose a growing demand for a reshaping of the event into its original form (Akita Sakigake Shimpo, July 7, 17, 24, 25, 1980). Those who focused on the traditional aspect of the event began to complain about advertisement space for the Work Kanto and for the sponsoring companies and about female participation in the event. The opinion was expressed that the extensive advertisement on the lanterns would ruin the Kanto image as folk culture. Also, some people believed that it was because of the female participation that the Kanto Festival had been caught in the rain for several years. The Akita Sakigake Shimpo of July 17th, 1980, ran an article about female participation in the Kanto. The article referred to opinions such as, "Originally, the Kanto is supposed to have barred women," and "For the sake of gaining back the original style of the Kanto, women should not be admitted to the Kanto."

Basically, women were not supposed to participate in the Kanto event. It was in 1967 when women participated for the first time as accompanying music performers for a Company Kanto team sponsored by Nissan, Akita. After that, with the development of tourism, women began to be allowed to participate in the event, but only as music performers. Traditionally, women were supposed to be less clean than men due to their inevitable bleeding at the time of menstruation and childbirth, and tended to be excluded from folk events. Some people claimed that the unwelcome rains during the Kanto Festival were attributable to female participation in the festival even as musicians. The Kanto Society had been cautious about female participation. In America, however, they found that the local spectators’ reaction to the female participation was different from that in Japan. In 1976, before the Kanto was designated as a national important intangible folk cultural heritage, the Kanto Society presented their first overseas performance in San Diego, USA, where a female spectator held a Kanto pole. The Kahoku Shimpo of November 11th, 1976, reported this overseas performance as follows:
Our tradition was not appreciated in the feminist country
"The sacredness of a Kanto pole is lost when a female steps over it."—male members of the Kanto Society firmly believe so even today. In the 300 years of the Kanto tradition, no women had ever held a Kanto bamboo pole. Recently, spurred by a boom in tourism, some young women began to participate in the accompanying music performance on flutes and drums. The Kanto performance, however, was still for males only. Nevertheless, this long tradition collapsed easily in San Diego. (snip) Shouting, "Change! Change!" the local spectators demanded the participants, including women, to lift the bamboo pole by turn. The tradition of the "no females" was broken thus easily. (snip) "However, we won’t let women hold a Kanto in Japan, not even the small Ko-waka pole." Misawa’s attitude toward Japanese women is strict. (snip) "Demand for equal treatment for men and women seemed to be strong in America," one of the Kanto Society members said. "No women admitted to festivals"—such an idea was not accepted, at least in America.

Women held Kanto poles—though this happened outside Japan, the incident was sensational enough to make the Kanto Society members aware of their negative concerns about female participation in the Kanto event. Triggered by the designation of the event as a national important intangible folk cultural heritage, a controversy about female participation arose in 1980. Since it happened to be the International Year of the Woman, the controversy received publicity in the media and was widely known throughout Japan. Eventually, it was settled by attributing the rain on the Festival days not to female participation but to the ancestral spirits who might have been angry at the festival being celebrated noisily on Sanno Street, where there used to be a graveyard for them. The Kanto Society members agreed to hold a memorial service at Tofuku Temple before the Kanto Festival. The controversy about female participation was thus peacefully settled. Ironically, the media exposure of the controversy helped to make the Kanto Festival known all over Japan and, as a result, to attract even more tourists than before.

Having overseas performances annually and adding the free performance contest and music performance contest, the increasingly popular Kanto event has grown in scale and in variety.

The improvement in skills and tourism has thus been interrelated and has generated a synergistic effect. Meanwhile, the free performance in the Kanto Skill Contest began to change. As the Kanto attracted increasing attention and the championship flag and trophy were offered by large corporations, it became necessary for the Kanto Society not only to improve skills and appreciate them but also to encourage competing skills and a clear scoring system for ranking. When one’s goal is to win a victory, one tends to go for it boldly without fear of failure. It may be admirable to dare to attempt difficult skills at the risk of failure in the training session. If one tries difficult skills without success in the contest, however, it can damage the dignity of the Kanto event. This is because "The most important aspect of Kanto skill is to keep the lantern light on (Hotta, 1967:119)". "One should neither be overly trusting of the bamboo’s strength nor think too little about breaking the bamboo. The Kanto is by no means a mere juggling act. It originates in the Neburinagashi, a traditional folkloric art." In addition, "One should not kill the spirit of the Kanto while performing it. Perform it with respect and love (Hotta 1995:191)."

On the one hand, the performer desires a victory, and on the other, he should be excessively careful not allow the Kanto to fall while trying difficult skills.

There is the story of a participant in an individual Kanto performance contest who attempted to perform with a Kanto that had 5 extension poles. His Kanto leaned forward to its point of maximum extension. Sensing this limit, he abandoned the last event of the lower back skill, on which his victory had depended. Watching this, a veteran Kanto performer said, "He made an appropriate decision. The essence of the Kanto skill is to judge the strength of a Kanto properly and to perform within its strength limit. Perform as if a Kanto had a life. Express the soul of the Kanto. A performer should be careful not to use any technique that may kill the spirit of the Kanto." (Hotta 2001:107-109). The participant attempted the same feat again the next year and broke the Kanto bamboo. In the 2003 Kanto Skill Contest, there was a similar accident caused by participants being too conscious of winning a victory. Watching one of the teams succeeding in performing a Kanto that had 7 extension poles earlier in the Free O-waka Group Performance Competition, each of the following teams tried 7 extension poles, in hope of winning a victory, but ended up dropping their
Kantos one after another. Learning from this, the Kanto Society made new rules that the maximum number of extension poles to be counted for grading is 5 and that though participating teams are free to use more than 5 extension poles, no extra points would be added for it.

As the Kanto Skill Contest has become increasingly competitive, problems in participant attitude have arisen as shown above. This has also affected the scoring system. Scoring is conducted in accordance with the regulations for judgment established by the Kanto Skill Contest Committee. By regulation, seven judges for the final contest are to be chosen from the prominent figures of Akita City, who have no experience in the Kanto performance. Some performers complain about the judging. If former Kanto performers serve as judges, they might see performers who are from their own respective hometowns in a favorable light. For fear of this possibility, judges are to be chosen from those who have no Kanto experience. Due to a lack of adequate numbers of appropriate candidates for judging, however, former Kanto performers serve as judges in the preliminary contest. According to Kanto Society administrator N, judges who are former performers seem to show no partiality toward those who are from their own hometowns. "In fact," Kanto Society administrator N says, "they tend to be stricter toward the performers from their hometowns than toward the other performers."

The criterion for scoring for the Kanto Skill Contest is stipulated in the rule book established by the Kanto Society. Judges for the final contest are to attend a workshop for judges before the festival. Though the rules serve as the criterion for scoring, judgments vary between those who have experienced the Kanto performance and who have not. Judges for the final contest are chosen from inexperienced people in order to avoid favoritism. This results in the creation of a gap between preliminary contest judges with Kanto experience and final contest judges without Kanto experience. In addition, this causes some performers to be dissatisfied. The following is an example of this gap in judgment. The outdoor Kanto performance is affected by weather conditions, especially wind. On windy days, the Kanto sways so heavily that it can make it difficult for the performer to stay within the 6-meter circle. According to Kanto experts, it is technically difficult to maneuver back into the circle, once the performer steps out of it.

From their own experiences, judges who are former Kanto performers tend to award or refrain from deducting points according to circumstances, even if a participant fails to perform strictly by the rules. Meanwhile, judges with no Kanto experience tend to stick closely to the rules and deduct points when a participant steps outside the circle. This causes a gap in judging. Since 1995, the knockout tournament system has been adopted for the final contest. In the knockout system, teams who have survived the preliminary contest are divided into two groups, red and white, to compete with each other. This has resolved the problem of an unreasonable gap in judgment.

Learning by trial and error in the annual Kanto Skill Contest, the Kanto Society has contributed to improvement in Kanto skill and has supported the Kanto tradition. Regarding the Kanto performance, Hotta, the former president of the Kanto Society, says, "You should control the Kanto, not be controlled by it (1995:179)." The Kanto Skill Contest, too, should not be affected or controlled by tourism. Follow the basic policy of the Kanto event and "Keep the Kanto up." The Kanto Skill Contest has been serving the improvement of Kanto skill.

5. Conclusion

While the Kanto performance improved through competitions, it became troublesome to score performances appropriately as the level of skill gradually improved. The Kanto Skill Contest began to be held as an indoor contest in 1954. Being free from any concerns about the winds, participants began to concentrate on their performances more than they had in the past. This contributed to creation of a variety of new techniques, such as kneeling down during the performance and using a fan. Such new techniques, however, were criticized later as maverick and were forbidden. Once, a participant, who had been allowed to perform with two hands, used both sides of his lower back during the lower back skill performance. This was also criticized as maverick. Later, it was decided that no points were to be given for the use of both sides of the lower back. After years of trial and error as shown above, the free performance, in which performers were less restricted, was included in the contest categories in 1986. But these free performances became less free in 2004. The Akita Sakigake Shimpo of

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August 5th, 2004 printed an article entitled "Skill should be more valued than visual appeal—"Free the Kanto performance and there will be no limit to the number of extension poles." This article implied that visual effects rather than skills had taken priority in the free Kanto performance. According to Kanto Society administrator N, however, the performance was restricted not because its visual appeal had been overly emphasized, but because overheated performers had paid little attention to their own actual skills, had dared to try many more extension poles than they could deal with, and had ended up sacrificing their Kanto. Skill and appearance are not necessarily antagonistic. The improvement in Kanto skill has attracted an increasing number of tourists to the Kanto Festival. It is the insistent belief of the Kanto Society that, while it is valuable to improve skills and performances through competition, every Kanto performer should make efforts to keep the Kanto lights on.

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Name: Sayaka Hashimoto
Affiliation: Doctoral Program in Human Sciences, Waseda University
Address: 2-579-15, Mikajima Tokorozawa, Saitama 359-1192 Japan
Brief Biographical History: 2005- Doctoral Program in Human Sciences, Waseda University
Membership in Learned Societies: • Japan Society of Sport Anthropology • Waseda Society of Cultural Anthropology • Japan Olympic Academy
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