CHAPTER NINETEEN

POPULATION DECLINE, MUNICIPAL AMALGAMATION, AND THE POLITICS OF FOLK PERFORMANCE PRESERVATION IN NORTHEAST JAPAN

Christopher S. Thompson

INTRODUCTION

In rural Japan, post-war population decline is drastically changing the way local folk traditions are situated in community life. This chapter explores a relatively unknown consequence of the Great Heisei Era Amalgamation Initiative (Heisei [1989—present] Dai Gappei), instituted in 1999 as one of many state mandated decentralization policies designed to mediate the effects of the nation’s declining total fertility rate currently at 1.26. This figure, an all time low, contrasts sharply a post-World War II peak of 4.54 in 1947, the largest number of births in a single year recorded in 1949 (2.7 million), and a rate sufficiently above 2.08 until the end of 1974—high enough to maintain existing population levels. Yet, during the ensuing decades, fertility numbers have dropped below 2.0, and have continued to shrink. At the same time, experts predict that by mid-century, over one-third of Japan’s population will consist of seniors over the age of 65 (Miyazaki et al. 2006:14). In recent years, much speculation has centred on the possible negative social, economic, and political ramifications of this demographic shift, as well as the state implemented strategies intended to negotiate this change, especially at the district level and in neighbourhood life (Ikegami 2003). In this discussion, the possible repercussion on local cultural history and folk performance traditions, though particularly significant in provincial areas, is rarely addressed. For this reason, this chapter focuses specifically on how the Great Heisei Era Amalgamation Initiative may be affecting the future of potentially hundreds of historical folk performance traditions that survive at the local level, especially in rural areas of the nation’s periphery.

In 21st century Japan, there remain many folk performing arts that are rooted deeply in the traditional culture of the region in which they
exist. In Iwate prefecture, located in northeastern Honshu, one of these local traditions is *kagura*, or Shinto shamanic dance. The study of folk performance traditions such as *kagura* in northeast (Tohoku) Japan have been a mainstay of Japanese ethnology since the early 20th century. But surprisingly, little has been written about the present-day challenges faced by those who actively maintain these traditions in the communities where they persist. In the past two decades, Japan’s fluctuating demographics and state mandated decentralization initiatives designed to help regulate population change have been recognized as major factors challenging the stability of community life and the preservation of local folk culture in Japan’s rural townships (Thornbury 1997: 110–114; Tsubohari 1999: 1–16; Thompson 2006: 127–128). Despite this finding, not much is known about how specific state policies implemented to accommodate national population decline are affecting efforts to practice and preserve historical traditions at the community level. This chapter contributes toward filling this void by examining how Japan’s most recent state imposed Cities, Towns, and Villages Amalgamation Law (*Shichōson Gappō Tokurei-hō*) enacted in 1999, known more colloquially as the Heisei Dai Gappō, is affecting the *kagura* tradition in Ishihatooka, a rural hamlet in the municipality of Tōwa-chō, located in south central Iwate prefecture.

The chapter begins with a historical overview of state mandated amalgamation initiatives during Japan’s modern period (1868–present) to establish the connection between municipal consolidations, population decline, and funding for folk performance preservation in the nation’s rural, regional areas. Next, Ishihatooka *Kagura* is situated within the heritage of its age-old tradition, and inside the boundaries of Tōwa-cho, itself a product of an earlier state mandated municipal merger in 1955. Following this discussion, I articulate a contemporary emic view of *kagura* in Ishihatooka, and describe the many challenges this troupe and its support community have faced as the Great Heisei Era Amalgamation Initiative has been implemented locally. Key here is an understanding of the troupe’s relationship to its municipality that make it structurally and organizationally similar to a majority of local level grassroots folk traditions in Iwate and across the nation, but different from a more famous group in Take, a hamlet in the neighbouring town of Ōhasama, and others like it. This difference is examined further as I describe why a required merger of Tōwa-cho with three nearby towns impelled by the Cities, Towns, and Villages Amalgamation Law is sure to erode Ishihatooka *Kagura* as a historically hamlet-centred