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English Folk Dancing

—Discussion of Morris Dance—

By *Shuko Homma**

I have studied Morris Dance described as a centuries-old folk dance in Chapter III of a book, Douglas Kennedy's *English Folk Dancing—Today and Yesterday*, and I wish to discuss and state my opinions on its historical relationships with the modern dances.

Upon referring to the authoritative *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is found that the words, 'Morris' and 'Morris Dance', were first used about the middle of the 15th century. Although, as to the etymology of the words, it is not clearly shown in the dictionary, it indicates that such words are associated with the Moorish. A further suggestion in the dictionary is that they have an interesting implication of the Robin Hood legend or dramas. It seems that the Morris Dance was most popularly played in the times when the above citation was made, i.e., about the mid-15th century.

In those old days festivals took place in mid-winter, in spring or in early summer as symbols of renewal or continuity of life. Morris Dance was played as one of the highlights of the spring festival. Towards the end of the 19th century when people began to direct their interest to the rural districts, Cecil J. Sharp happened to watch Morris Dance at a certain village in Oxfordshire. He, most interested in it, began studying it, his knowledge of it was deepened, and at last he published book in five volumes. His books gave an opportunity, by which people came to know that it had been a folk dance played on a Europe-wide scale and that it had a very long history. Crowds of males were dressed in white, each with white handkerchiefs and wood sticks in their hands and wore bells on their waists and legs. The dance was accompanied by music which was played only by a person presumably in the status of a leader with his flute and small drum, or with his bagpipe or accordion.

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Those males danced furiously to the music. This is the basic form of Morris Dance. However, detailed studies have made it known that there were delicate differences in the dancing from country to country as well as from area to area, therefore that there were various styles in the dance. As to the relationships between this dance and the sword dance or horn dance, there would be important subjects involving factors for which discussions should be made on a very large scale and based on a long history.

The above statements are the summary of my discussion of Morris Dance. Dances are considered to have been born at the same time when human beings began their living on earth. Therefore, Morris Dance, which was born as it were a breath of the British life, is also considered to have taken its shape after a lapse of very many years.

In university physical education, I think it meaningful to understand the background under which ancient dances such as Morris Dance were born, and sense Nature and the mental climate which fostered them. In so doing, I think, a deeper approach can be made to the essence of the folk dances.

I hope to continue this study of mine in order to know further the genealogy of Morris Dance, and at the same time I wish to deepen my understanding of the present-day meaning these ancient dances gave to us.