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English Folk Dancing—II

—Discussions on Sword Dance—

By *Shuko Homma**

What represents the folk dances in England is the Morris Dance in spring and the Sword Dance in winter. Thanks to the energetic work made by Cecil Sharp, both dances were recorded and the records have been still preserved.

Alike the Morris Dance, the Sword Dance has a very old tradition; as to the origin of this dance, it is said that it originated with the half-magic religious ceremonies inherent in ancient society. When we analogize this point, the description in *Golden Bough* written by J. G. Frazer may be much helpful.

The Sword Dance has been pervaded since a long, long time ago over a fairly wide areas in farming villages of Northern Europe; this dance also has a religious functional meaning, which implies that it has some relations with Christianity.

German archaeologists have long before been interested in this dance. Tacitus of Ancient Rome (55–120?) had described at the beginning of the 24th Chapter of his noted book *Germania* that the brave Sword Dance had been played as enjoyment at gatherings of Ancient Germanic racial society. Also at the 1040th line of the Old English epic *Beowulf* (written at the beginning of the 8th century), the word “Sweorda-gelac” as used as a metaphor for a battle.

Even through these fragmentary materials, it may roughly be assumed that the Sword Dance was a folk dance which had a close relationship with one of the ancient Germanic races which lived mainly in Northern Europe.

The minstrels of the Middle Ages seem to have included this dance in their repertory.

It is known that this dance was played as the most attractive *ludus* (play) at Nuremberg, Germany, in 1350. In Northern England, especially Yorkshire, Northumberland and Durham, people had traditional plays in which the Sword Dance

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was played. Before long, the dance was separated from the play; two grotesque figures participated in the dance and songs were also sung as it was played.

The dance is divided into two kinds according to the length of the sword used. One is the long sword dance (at Yorkshire), namely, a steel sword of thick blade and longer than one meter is used while it is played; the other is the short sword dance (rapper) (at Northumberland and Durham) which uses a flexible steel sword the blade of which is thin, the length is about 50 centimeters, with a handle at its respective ends. Judging from such swords, it is known that this dance has relations with coal mines, being worthwhile to be paid attention.

Walter Scott, the novelist of the 19th century, while travelling Shetland Islands, witnessed this dance, and used it in his novel, *The Pirate*. He thought that the dance had its origin in Scandinavia. The areas where the Sword Dance is generally played are almost in accord with the areas into which the Viking made their invasions. This is one of the grounds for his assertion. However, it seems that the dance itself had been played before their invasion. The manner by which it was played had no association with a battle, but probably meant a Mock or a symbolic sacrifice. It is considered that the Sword Dance primarily had an agricultural characteristic and was played very popularly at winter festivals in farming villages.