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Dances on May Day in Europe

*By Shuko Honma**

The festivals on May Day in Europe are the traces of the primitive festivals performed among the German race in ancient times, and they bless the end of winter and the advent of spring at the same time. In the festivals, people's straight joy of living is expressed in songs and dances.

In this paper, consideration is primarily made of what meaning and in what manner the May Day and the Maypole dances indispensable for these festivals, which had been performed in Europe since ancient times, had and were conducted, and description is given to the historical background and development of these festive events.

As to the origin of the May Day festivals in Europe, there are two views, one is that these festivals are the traces of the primitive festivals, which followed the Goths tradition of the German race, and the other is that they are originated in the Floralia in Rome dedicated to the Flora. These were originally born from the faith of natural objects, and it is assumed that the first day of May be esteemed as the most important day on which the change of season takes place.

In many regions in Europe, on the eve of May Day, young people go to the woods playing music and blowing bugles, and cut trees. These trees are erected in the open spaces amid the villagers' watching and shouting for joy. Morris men with blackened faces and villagers participate in the singing and dancing performed around the erected tree all day long.

This event is spread extensively among the farmers in Europe as a popular festival in their faith that the spirit of the tree flavors them with a rich harvest and the birth of many children. The dances performed by European people with love and intimacy may have been Morris dances and Maypole dances.

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In *The Dance* by Cecil J. Sharp and A. P. Oppé, a picture entitled "A Ball in May" is contained showing one Carnival scene in France of 1763, in which beautifully dressed gentlemen and ladies are dancing around a Maypole with green vines in their hands. It is assumed that the Maypole dance performed among the common people at about the middle of the 18th Century was enjoyed at that time at balls held by the nobles.

In England, the May Day dance performed by the Morris dancers was rejected and oppressed by the influence of Puritanism, and it was prohibited at a certain time, compelling this May Day custom and festival to be interrupted. However, the May Day custom and dance which had been surviving barely in remote country places came to life again at long last with the revival of King's power in 1660, and they were included in the festivals of Whitsuntide and Oak Apple Day.

Conclusion

The Maypole dance performed presently in various places in Europe was performed originally as a May Day dance to glorify the life of the common people, and it was a product of their thought to affirm the actuality.

In England, the May Day dance closely related to the life of the common people was rejected at a certain time by the Puritanic thought in its historical process, however, it was brought to life again at the opportunity of the revival of the King's power, and it may be said that this dance has kept living with immortal power of life together with the life of the Common people.

As to the origin of this May Day dance, it seems that this dance was born from the thought of the primitive and ancient people to worship natural objects and trees, seeing from its form taken as it is played around the Maypole. It is also considered that the heart of the common people, which hopes for a rich harvest and the birth of many children, is symbolized in this May Day dance, although it has a primitive popular faith in its origin. Consequently, at the present time, the Maypole dance, although it has the background of primitive religions, has almost lost its original meaning, however, it is living among people firmly as a dance to be performed on the occasion of festivals or athletic meets.

Since this dance always lives with the common people, its life is immortal, and it will surely keep living hereafter by surpassing historical changes.