

Kurume History Walks

No.14 Folk Performing Arts and Festivals Korasan Shishimai to Miimachi Fuyu 高良山獅子舞と御井町風流

There are various folk entertainments and events which are held in festivals throughout Chikugo Province. According to old inhabitants, they used to be incomparably grand with today.

People used to have many occasions to gather for religious events and farming works. It was the local communities which had sustained festivals and its related folk arts. But, those activities are gradually declining because of the social development after World War II.

This number introduces the folk performing arts and festivals of Miimachi Area, Kurume. They are precious treasures that our ancestors have preserved despite the difficulties.



Korasan Lion Dance



Miimachi Fuyu

■ Korasan Lion Dance (高良山獅子舞 *Korasan Shishi Mai*)

In ancient times, people considered the deities as powerful spirits, and believed that these spirits affected the future of everything in Nature, human life and death. So they thought that it was necessary to invoke and calm spirits before carrying things of daily life or politics.

They had believed that the spirits appeared as lions. The unruly lion ward off evil spirits. The Lion Dance, which exists throughout Japan in various forms, represents these spirits in festivals or a special occasion such as the New Year. It is also performed in the Shinto ritual dance.

In the Kamakura period (1185-1333), there was a leading family, the Umezu, of the folk performing arts in Chikugo Province. They monopolized the right to perform the lion dance in the province. It is said to be only after 1669 that the residents came to be able to perform it.

After going through the decline and the revival, local men from 16 to 60 years old reformed a group under the name “Korasan Doshikai (Mt. Kora Fellows)” in 1977. They dedicate the dance during the New Year festival and the autumn festival at the Kora-taisha Shrine.

Korasan Lion Dance shows very simple and solemn gestures of purifying, so we presume that it was passed down through ages. A pair of two men perform each of two lions, red and black. A man holds the head of 25 kg with the left hand and moves the thin with the right, while the other takes part of the hind legs. Lion’s body is made with woven ramie. Its total weight is about 50 kg. Every movement requires strength.



■ Miimachi Furyu (御井町風流)

The term *furyu* meant gorgeous and glittery. Originally in the Heian period (794-1185) when the nobility led a life of luxury, they liked gorgeous design and described it as *furyu*. Then, the term became popular among common people. They lavishly decorated festival equipment and costumes.

Furyu performing art itself was from a ritual, accompanied by a beating drum, to pray a rich harvest during planting rice. It was developed in the 13th and 16th centuries, and was handed down in various forms across Japan. In Chikugo province, it is performed in the transmitted rhythm of one or two drums. (This style is popular throughout Kyushu Island).

It is unknown when the Miimachi Furyu started. After going through the decline and the revival, as similar as to the situation of the Korasan Lion Dance, the local resident of Miimachi formed a group under the name of “the Miimachi Furyu Preservation Association (Miimachi Furyu Hozonkai)” in 1977, and they have dedicated the performance during the New Year festival and the autumn festival at Kora-taisha Shrine.

The Miimachi Furyu keeps a simple and forceful style as well as other Furyus in Chikugo province.



■ Kora-taisha Shrine Divine Procession (高良大社御神幸 *Kora Taisha Goshinko*)

Divine procession (*goshinko* or *gojinko*) is a Shinto ritual representing the deity’s travel between a village and the shrine. The purpose of travel is to grant people’s requests in the village. So, in order to visualize the travel, people started a festival in which the portable shrines (*mikoshi*; on the figure below) paraded the streets.

And the folk performing arts came to follow it. Some presented the Lion Dance or the Furyu, others showed the Lord's procession and the children's. This ritual became a major event integrating the local folk entertainments.

The Kora-taisha Goshinko is said to have started in 767 and has intermittently continued once every fifty years, despite many times of decline and revival.

In 1995, a 1600 years grand festival was held for three days. The procession of over 500 meters started with the leading Shinto priests followed by two men disguised as ogres (*oni*), the Lion dancers, the Furyu performers, and the children in a file.

The Korasan Tamatare-gu Shrine procession picture scroll (painted in 1812; below) concretely describes the Goshinko of that time.



A part of the picture scroll of The Korasan Tamatare-gu Shrine procession

■ Korasan Autumn Festival (高良山例大祭 Korasan Reitaisai)

This autumn festival is held for three days. In ancient times, the provincial governors of the whole Kyushu had gathered up for the festival, and the four biggest families; the Shoni, the Otomo, the Kikuchi and the Shimazu had taken turns conducting the rituals.

People had a special dish for the festival: rice with chestnuts in Chikugo Province, including Kurume, and Hizen province. Children called on neighbors in the evening to get the chestnuts. On the approach to the shrine, there used to be some sellers of the chestnuts or the persimmons, and the restaurants of the pressed sushi with Barracuda.

Today, the Kora Lion Dance, the Miimachi Furyu and other dances are performed in the festival.

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