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Keeping the Tradition Alive





On the morning of the Spring Offering Ceremony, Akimoto and his companions head toward Suwa Shrine

PHOTO&TEXT
BY YUKI IWANAMI

FUKUSHIMA, Japan - "He's not young like he used to be. I told him not to do it" complains Keiko Akimoto while watching her sixty-three year old husband Masashi prepare for the *Kagura*. Practice has been going on every night for the ceremony at the town's Suwa shrine. Akimoto grins wryly but has no intention of giving up because of a few raps from his wife.

The traditional art of Togo Kagura, dance and music dedicated to the Shinto gods, has been passed down for generations in the Kami-Kawauchi district of Kawauchi town, Fukushima but is fading fast. Until now, members of the *seinendan* or "young men's association" made up the majority of participants for the spring and autumn ceremonies, but as the village population dwindled, maintaining the tradition was becoming more and more difficult.

What made matters worse was the nuclear accident at the Fukushima Daichi Nuclear Power Station in 2011. Kawauchi is within the 30km radius of the plant, some areas within twenty. At the time of the accident, the whole town had to be evacuated. Though the Kawauchi town office was quick to declare their return home in January 2012 and kicked off recovery efforts relatively early, as of December 1st, only 57% of former residents are listed as living in Kawauchi (those who live in temporary housing or rented accommodation outside the town are

included if their preferred postal address is Kawauchi. Only 20% of temporary/rented accommodation has been permanently returned). Of those listed as living in Kawauchi, nearly 60% are aged sixty years and above. Many of the younger residents have yet to return, leaving even fewer participants to practice the *Kagura*.

In spring, the ceremony wished for a good crop. In autumn, it was to give thanks for the harvest. During the autumn festival, each house in the district was visited by the *Kagura* team to have any evil spirits expeled. For those who mainly lived off the land, *Kagura* was closely intertwined with daily life and an important event to wish for the blessing of God and nature. When he was a child, Akimoto would joyously wait for the *Kagura* to come to his house. After joining the *seinendan* in his twenties, following his father's footsteps, he chose to be the dancer instead of playing instruments like the flute or drum. His father was delighted with the decision and taught the routine himself. The rigorous practice always took place at night after work. Father seemed to take on a different personality once the *kaburi* mask was in his hand. This would always surprise Akimoto as well as deepen respect towards his father. After practice, the *seinendan* members would gather to drink *sake* and trade banter, also good memories from those days.

In Kawauchi, there are three shrines named Suwa. One each in Kami- Kawauchi, Shimo- Kawauchi and Takatashima. In Takatashima, which recovered from the disaster earlier, a ritual offering of a Shishimai Kagura or lion dance had already taken place. Shimo- Kawauchi

was able to host one during the last spring festival too. While watching these events take place, Kami-Kawauchi resident Akimoto felt that the townspeople's identity rested in these traditional arts and strongly felt the need to host a ceremony as well. Many of his friends he talked to rallied to support him, but most were older than fifty. Akimoto was the only one in town who could dance the *Kagura*, and he himself had not done so in thirty years.

The *kaburi* mask used during the dance must be kept in place with the teeth, and Akimoto had an orthodontist fabricate a special mouthpiece to support his weakening jaws. He could feel how his sharper moves of younger days were now lost, but brushed up his skills, at times studying old footage. He could recognize his late father teaching the routine in those films.

"My hope is that the younger ones will see our efforts and are somehow motivated to keep the tradition alive" says Akimoto, but there is not much hope at the moment. If the event is postponed for a few years again, it may disappear forever. To avoid this, Akimoto organized a conservation group and wishes to get more of the younger people involved.

"Masashi-san, thank you. That was really wonderful". After the successful dance routine at the offering ceremony, Akimoto is greeted with the enthusiastic handshakes of the townspeople. Out of breath and grimacing from both exhaustion and relief, his face seemed to glow with a sense of achievement. (Reported in 2014)

Translation by Taro Konishi



Togo Kagura is dedicated at the Suwa Shrine in Kami-Kawauchi



Residents watch the *kagura*, smiling and clapping along



Reviving the *Kagura* After the Disaster

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Above: Akimoto grimaces from fatigue after the dance routine

Above Left: On the same day, Saigo Shishi-gashira dance is presented by the few children keeping the tradition alive

Left: Members celebrate after the ceremony. A sense of relief makes everyone relaxed and talkative

Below: Members practice at the local meeting hall





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