

The Tofu Festival

[Text: This black and white video was filmed between 1965 and 1966. In honor of the quality of the original work, the film has been reproduced for this video without any modern enhancements.]

Winters in the Tohoku region are harsh. Rice fields extend in every direction over the Shonai Plain of Yamagata Prefecture. In the winter, the plains are buried deep in snow, and bitter winds blow in from the Sea of Japan. Outside all activity seems to have come to a halt. However, once you step into the daily lives of the residents, you may find unexpected energy pulsing within.

To the south of the Shonai Plain is Kushibiki. This seemingly quiet district of Kurokawa begins to show signs of activity in the lead-up to the Ogi Festival held to celebrate a lunar new year and to pray for a peaceful, plentiful life. The Ogi Festival is held annually on February 1 and 2, the dates of the New Year according to the old lunar calendar.

Ten days before the festival, some banners of Kasuga Jinja Shrine are raised.

This is the time when the people of the village prepare roasted and frozen tofu. The tofu is roasted in preparation for the festival. It is made as an offering to the deities but also to serve as a main of the traditional dishes for participants, giving the celebration its other name: Tofu Festival. Hundreds of millions of soybeans are consumed during the two-day festival.

The volunteers' hands are freezing in the cold water. Thousands of pieces of tofu are cut and placed on skewers. A temporary hut is built to roast the tofu. An oblong hearth is built in the floor and the hardened pulp (*okara*) that was separated from soybean milk during tofu production packed around it. The villagers sit around the fire to roast the tofu, wearing gloves to shield their hands from the heat. They use long bamboo sticks to signal to those on the other side of the hearth when the tofu is almost ready.

[Background conversation]

When the tofu is finally ready, it is swiftly removed and replaced with more tofu.

[Background conversation]

In due course, the sake begins to make the rounds, and the temperature as well as the merriment gradually rises.

[Background conversation]

The men don't stint on firewood, keeping the fire burning intensely. The temperature soars inside the hut, despite the cold wind and heavy snow outside. As the temperature inside the hut builds, it can get too hot and require cooling. One of the volunteers has to go out to shovel snow onto the roof to prevent the hut and those inside from overheating.

Now the children are back from school. Their high-pitched voices resound inside the hut. The laughter and repartee among the villagers transform the simple event of roasting tofu into a splendid festival all its own.

[Background conversation]

[Music]

The roasted tofu is placed in a large box and carried outside. It is taken to a separate unheated hut, where the individual tofu pieces are lined up side by side and left overnight. By morning, exposure to cold air transforms the freshly roasted tofu into frozen tofu.

Rehearsal of the noh performances to be performed during the Ogi Festival at Kasuga Jinja Shrine begin that evening. The joviality of the tofu preparation during the day gives way to an atmosphere of solemnity at night.

Kurokawa Noh is said to have a history of more than 500 years. It is considered not only a performing art, but an offering dedicated to the deities. The involvement of children is particularly significant as it is believed they are without defilement and represent the purest form of humanity to appear before the deities.

[Rehearsal]

This boy is only four years old. He is learning how to perform one of the festival's most important rituals, *daichifumi* (stomping on the earth), to a simple rhythm. He is also rehearsing a song that is similar to a prayer. Words are added to the song for rhythmical effect.

The rehearsal is a reminder that Kurokawa Noh is not just a performing art but also an offering to the deities. It is developing into a unique form of performing art that is becoming increasingly commonplace.

[Rehearsal]

Snow continues to fall.

The liveliness of the tofu preparation and the peacefulness of the noh performances are contrasting aspects of the Ogi Festival. Through involvement in both, residents welcome the advent of spring.