

Totsukawa O-odori: A UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage

(Web)

Totsukawa O-odori is a regional style of the Japanese folk dances collectively known as *furyu-odori*, which are recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. *Furyu-odori* are community performances characterized by lively steps set to traditional songs and performed by local residents dressed in vivid *yukata* (summer kimono).

The *o-odori* dances performed in Totsukawa communities are believed to have been passed on by travelers on the popular pilgrimage routes to Kumano. They are part of the *bon-odori* tradition, a summer dance event that has several purposes: the spiritual aspect of welcoming ancestral spirits and dancing with them; the social aspect of finding potential romantic partners; and as entertainment, with participants competing for attention with their performance and appearance.

The dances take place in open plazas lit by colorful *chochin* paper lanterns. The songs are sung by both male and female singers, accompanied by the steady beat of hand-held *taiko* drums. Steps to the songs are passed down from older generations and practiced for weeks before the event. Food stalls selling shaved ice and cotton candy keep young children happy as the dancing goes on. Most hamlets once held dance events that began at sundown and sometimes lasted until dawn. Today, however, only four districts (Musashi, Ohara, Nishigawa, and Yunohara) carry on the *o-odori* tradition, and the dances usually wind down not long after midnight.

Over the years, each community developed a particular style of music and dance, and though some of

the songs are shared, the tempo and steps may differ greatly. Dancers in Musashi and Ohara circle the small, colorful *yagura* stage to many up-tempo songs, for example, while the performers in Nishigawa form straight parallel lines of dancers and drummers, and move to slow and stately rhythms without any central stage. Each hamlet has its own props, including tasseled drumsticks and lanterns on bamboo poles. Some props, such as folding fans, appear everywhere. The hamlets have their own song lists as well (36 songs in Musashi's case), though not all are performed every year. While some songs once lasted up to an hour or more, they have been shortened to fit today's tastes.

Every summer, from August 13 to 15, dance events are held in the four districts and six other villages. Visitors are more than welcome to watch the festivities and to join in and try to imitate the steps of the various dances. On the next weekend, local dancers gather to perform short programs in the plaza next to the Hotel Subaru, followed by a fireworks display. These events are ideal opportunities to enjoy this long-cherished tradition and support its preservation.