Folkdance and Fairgrounds: More Notes on Neighborhood Festivals in Tokyo

By

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1 FOLKDANCE

Doing *bon odori* at festival time is, for the Japanese, the most natural thing in the world. Festival time is a happy time, and when people are really happy they want to dance. And *bon odori* is the national folkdance of Japan. It is a genre of true folkdance, a dance that all the people can do. And if you don't know the steps or the gestures, you join the circle anyway, and learn as you go. That much needs to be said before we talk about the "Buddhist" origin of the dance, and its "Buddhist" meaning.

Bon odori, or Bon dance, is so named because of its association in the popular mind with the Buddhist festival of O-Bon. There is in Japan a happy division of labor between religions: Shinto shrines are concerned with whisking away corruption and impurity, and preserving life in all its vigor; Buddhist temples are concerned with funerary custom, and related spiritual matters. O-Bon, the one national festival with strongly Buddhistic undertones, is sometimes called the festival of the dead. It has also been called the Japanese All Souls' Day. Geoffrey Bownas observes that, like all Japanese festivals, it has three sequential elements: 1) the welcoming of a returning spirit, 2) joint entertainment, and 3) the escorted departure of the spirit.[1] *Bon odori* is simply the entertainment offered by the people for the spirit, and, *pari passu,* for themselves, at the Bon festival. The spirit, or spirits in this case, are the spirits of the departed dead of the community. The festival begins, in some

1. Geoffrey Bownas, *Japanese Rainmaking and Other Folk Practices* (London, 1963), p. 96.

regions, with the residents of a town or village going to the community cemetery and lighting the lanterns on their family graves; from these lanterns they take fire to light their own paper lanterns, which they take home, using the same fire to light lanterns on their household memorial shelf (*butsudan*), thereby "taking the spirits from the grave back into the home."[2] And that is the meaning of O-Bon. The spirits of the dead come back from beyond the grave, once a year, to be with their families again, for the four day holiday. The family greets them and ushers them back to their home town, and then all the townspeople entertain all the ghosts *en masse,* with the most delightful and uncomplicated dancing. At the end of the holiday, the villagers escort their ghosts to the outskirts of town, where the graves are, and hope they will not return until the appointed day, the following summer. This is a festival that is known, in one form or another, all over Asia; its spread is usually associated with the spread of Buddhism. In India it seems to have been, in part, a celebration of the end of the rainy season, when the monks returned from their period of seclusion, after weathering the monsoon rains in dank caves or forest groves. In legend, it is associated with the filial piety of one of the Lord Buddha's disciples, who is known in Japan as Mokuren; the dance is said to have been inaugurated to celebrate the release of Mokuren's mother from the fires of hell, and to express his joy and gratitude. It flourished in China, where traditionally all relationships were seen in terms of family relationships, and devotion of a son to his parents' comfort and memory was highly prized. It reached Japan late in the sixth or early in the seventh century, where, according to one scholar, "it was grafted onto an indigenous Japanese harvest festival with a primitive type of folk dance. . . ."[3]

Reversing the perspective, can we then say that the dance commonly known as *bon odori* is simply an ancient (pre-Buddhist) folk dance which, in the time of Shōtoku Taishi, became associated with a pan-Asian festival for the entertainment (and hence placation) of ghosts, newly arrived in Japan? The Buddhistic qualities of the Bon festival seem very thin and tenuous indeed, and arise out of Buddhism's somewhat accidental association with the Far Eastern cult of the dead, and its even more accidental brush with Chinese culture and the Confucian family ethic. As for the dance, it would seem to have no intrinsic "Buddhist" significance. If anything, its roots are in the ("Shintoist")

2. Honda Yasuji, *Nihon no Minzoku Geinō* (Tokyo, 1960), p. 49.

3. Barbara B. Smith, "The Bon-Odori in Hawaii and in Japan," in *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, vol. XIV (1962), p. 36.

cult of the celebration of life and of the earth.

Honda Yasuji, in his recent work on folk diversions, distinguishes two types of indigenous Japanese group dances: *dengaku* and *furyû*. In *dengaku,* the villagers dance around a big drum, whose flat surface represents a rice field. The dancers imitate, in their gestures, the hoeing of the fields, the sowing of the seeds, transplanting the rice, chasing off the birds, and finally harvesting the rice crops, singing together all the while. It is a dance done in the early springtime, to ensure a good year in the rice fields,[4] and a variant is done again in May or June, at rice-planting time.[5]

Furyû is a type of community dance that was performed originally in times of disease and epidemic. It follows Bownas' classic pattern for a festival: the malevolent spirit that is believed to be causing the epidemic is invited to take his seat in a beautifully decorated carriage called a *hanagasa,* an umbrella of flowers. He is then transported about in an elegant procession, and entertained with "gay and rapturous dances." Before he knows what has hapened to him, the impure spirit finds he has been taken to the town's boundary line, and there is invited to disembark (presumably to be met shortly by another hastily assembled procession, complete with flowery umbrella, to convey him to the borders of the next town). Why do pestilential spirits allow themselves to be duped over and over in this way? Because they find the dancing and merry-making impossible to resist; it leaves even the most unruly of hobgoblins hopelessly weak-willed and flabby. The custom of *furyû* dancing in fact became so popular that it came to be used for entertaining benevolent spirits as well, and then the spirits of the ancestors.[6] Professor Honda told me he regards the *furyû* as the true source of the folkdance now known as *bon odori.*

Bon dancing, as a Buddhist observance, began early in the tenth century. It was done by priests, who danced as they recited the *nembutsu.* By the time the festival had become a national observance, toward the end of the fifteenth century, the priests had invited the laity to join them in a dance derived from a type of *furyû.*[7]

But the *bon odori,* as it is danced in Tokyo's streets and empty lots, bears little resemblance to a medieval *nembutsu* dance. Nor is it related to spring planting or autumn harvest (except in the nostalgic sense that

4. Honda, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
5. *ibid.*, p. 53.
6. *ibid.*, pp. 53–54.
7. *ibid.*, p. 51.

all Tokyoites, the "downtown" people especially, remember their family's roots in the countryside), nor to primitive notions of public health. Yet, oddly enough, elements of all these (with the probable exception of the doctrinally heavy *nambutsu* rite) may survive as remnants in the present day custom. If they do, they should be apparent enough in the "form" of the dance: in its instrumentation, its personnel, its lines of flow, its rhythms and movements, and, ultimately, in the mood it generates in the community.

It is worth noting in passing that there are in Japan festival rythms that do have what might be called a specifically Buddhistic form. In these cases, a scriptural text or formula of Buddhist significance is chanted by the participants, usually to the accompaniment of drums, and sometimes of other instruments as well. What is unique about these forms is that the text determines the rythm. That is of course consistent with the character of Buddhism in Japan. It is a highly verbal religion, heavy with scriptures and sermons. The shrine faith ("Shinto") is by contrast remarkably non-verbal, and free of doctrine and the chanting of doctrine. Even the chant of the *mikoshi* carriers, if it could be said to be verbal, consists of essentially meaningless words. That is not to say that the chant is meaningless, but simply that it has no verbal meaning. The songs of *bon odori* are work songs and love songs, so the words have no specifically religious (in the sense of doctrinal) meaning. *Kagura* is pantomime. Occasionally the *kagura* dancer speaks a line, but the sound is muffled by the heavy wooden masks, and can't be heard over the noise of the shrine's festival fairgrounds atmosphere; but nobody worries about that. It is not until you get to the sanctuary that you begin to find something in the nature of verbal religion. And even there, much of the priest's *norito* (prayer) is conveyed through his voice intonation, and is supplemented by the errie sounds of the *gagaku* orchestra; and in any event, the laity do not attend the rites at the sanctuary! The words are meant for the ears of the daity, not the laity.

But it is different with Buddhism. Words are important. The Buddha's teachings are important. Even the name of the Lotus Scripture has magical potency, and is repeated over and over by the followers of Saint Nichiren. *Namu Myōhōrenge-kyō,* "Glory to the Scripture of the Lotus of the Wonderful Teachings." I heard that formula set to at least four different rythms at the O-Eshiki festival at Honmonji, in Ikegami, Ota-ku (O-Eshiki is the celebration of the anniversary of Saint Nichiren's death, on October 12–13). At the death site, it was:

NAM MYO ho REN GE kyo
DON DON don DON DON don

At the tomb, it was set to a more vigorous beat:

NAM myo HO REN GE KYO
DON don DON DON DON DON

In the procession, as clusters of devotees (members of the *kō*, or pilgrim societies) marched by, twirling *matoi* (fire-brigade standards) and jostling *mando* (festival lanterns), came the most vigorous rythm of all:

NAM MYO HO REN GE kyo
DON DON DON DON DON don

While inside the main hall, enormous drums pounded out a steady din for waves of pilgrims who poured through the hall:

(NAM myo ho REN ge kyo)
DON don don DON don don

These are all variations on one set mantric formula. The formula contains six syllables, and all the rythmic variations must be accomplished within the limitations of that framework. Other, much more complicated illustrations are to be found within Japanese Buddhism and quasi-Buddhism: for example, in the style in which the Yamabushi chant their sutras over the burning pile of brushwood, prior to walking barefoot over the hot ashes. Here the chant is a wildly primitive, driving rite of exorcism; but, again, the form is determined by the words of the sacred text.

James Kirkup, easily the most sensitive visitor to Japan since Lafcadio Hearn, describes his first experience with *bon odori* in his travel diary. Near the railway station in Sendai, he encountered "a big tower . . . constructed from bamboo poles," draped with cloth with "very broad red and white stripes," about twenty-five feet tall, and "all hung round with paper lanterns." The tower was "roofed with reed," and had a high platform, on which "half-naked men wearing brief, tight white drawers . . ." played the music for the dance: a flutist, a hoarse singer, and "a young drummer jumping and whirling and shaking his head in ecstasy at the rhythms he was producing from a big, resonant drum that he belaboured with a couple of drumsticks, plain, thick wooden batons. . . . At first I thought there was also a xylophone, but this effect was made, I think, by the drummer beating the wooden

sides of the drum and the bamboo balustrade round the platform."[8]

Kirkup later put these observations into a poem, which he wrote specially for a Japanese radio program on festivals, and has given me his kind permission to publish. It captures the spirit and movement of the dance, especially the "repetition forms," better than anything I know.

BON ODORI

by James Kirkup

On a bamboo tower
The drum drum drum
The drum drum drum
On a bamboo tower
With a roof of reed
The drum drum drum
The flute flute flute
The flute flute flute
On a bamboo tower
With a roof of reed
And red cloth white cloth
The drum drum drum
The flute flute flute
A shouted song
A shouted song
On a bamboo tower
With a roof of reed
And red cloth white cloth
And dancing paper lanterns
The drum drum drum
The flute flute flute
A shouted song
And clapped hands
And clapped hands
On a bamboo tower
With a roof of reed
And red cloth white cloth
And dancing paper lanterns
The Sendai folk in yukata dance
To the drum drum drum
To the flute flute flute
To a shouted song
To clapped hands
To the shamisen the shamisen
To the shamisen the shamisen

8. James Kirkup, *The Horned Islands: A Journal of Japan* (New York, 1962), p. 258.

Round a bamboo tower
With a roof of reed
And red cloth white cloth
And dancing paper lanterns
The Sendai folk in yukata dance
Graceful in geta, graceful in geta
To the drum drum drum
To the flute flute flute
To a shouted song
To clapped hands
To the shamisen the shamisen
A passionate refrain, Yoi!
A passionate refrain, Yoi!
Yoi-yoi!
Yoi-yoi!

My own first encounter with *bon odori* was a little less perfect, a little less idyllic. I was on my way home, with my family, one September evening, when we happened upon the dancers in a little side-street off the main entrance to one of our neighborhood shrines. There was no tower, just a raised platform. The music was on records (canned music, we call it in America), but the athletic drummer was there, in his tight white undershorts and belly-band, and the girls were there in their crisp blue and white *yukata*. It was festival time at the shrine, and this was an obvious spin-off of the festival: a community round dance, especially for the women and girls of the community. They danced in three large ovals, which were intended as circles, but the street was very narrow. Women danced in the inner oval; girls in the center oval, and children in the outer circle. I don't know that it was planned that way; but there is informal agreement in these dances that the less experienced gravitate toward the outer ring, and the most skillful toward the center circle, for the dancers, in their movements, just naturally look to the center, where the pace is set, and the dancing is exemplary. I recall noting that the dance itself is a kind of dance-walk, with much of the secret of its style in the gestures made with the hands, and the graceful sweeps of the generous sleeves of the dancers' robes.

Our next encounter with the round-dancers was more impressive. We were again on our way home from a shrine festival, and were taking a short cut toward Kôrakuen, when we happened upon a very sizeable vacant lot, with the dance already in progress. The lot was large, but jammed to the walls with dancers and spectators. At the center of it all was a very tall and very shakey tower (*yagura*): mere scaffolding, a kind of upright open shed. It was squarish, and had two platforms. On the lower platform three or four of the very best dancers performed, setting

the style for all the others, arranged in concentric circles spreading out from the base of the tower. On the high platform stood the drummer, pounding the drum hard, causing the whole tower to shake and shudder. He was accompanied by three relief drummers, all in the customary brief costumes, who sat about smoking cigarettes, unconcerned over the possibility of the whole shed collapsing. Again there was a record player, apparently also up on the top landing. Our neighbor in the spectator's row, an official with the Japan National Railways' computer division, identified the first as a dance from Shikoku, the next as the famous Sado Okesa, then Tôkyô Ondô. He lamented that next year a large building will be built on this site, and the town will have nowhere else to go to dance the *bon odori.*

Is *bon odori* primarily a woman's dance?[9] Within Tokyo, it is not exclusively a dance done by women and girls, but it is primarily so. When I asked some of my best male informants around the neighborhood about the planning of the festival folkdance, they seemed to know little about it. One told me: "The *fujinkai* (the ladies' auxiliary of the town association) plans all the Bon dances. They have one on O-Bon, another for the *taisai* of the shrine, and they have one every night for a week, either in late July or early August, designed to coincide with the summer recess of the neighborhood school." Another told me his town has *bon odori* at the time of the shrine festival, but he thought it had no connection with the festival, but was "just a good time to get people together" (he was the local ward healer, and had a good eye for the best times for a little informal political campaigning). Another said he thought every town in his shrine-parish tried to stage a folkdance, and most managed to find space somehow—an empty lot, a school playground, the street—and he certainly did think of the community dance as part of the festival. But none of the men seemed to know much of the details of planning for these dances.

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9. The anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker (*Stranger and Friend,* New York, 1966, p. 112) says that on the South Pacific island of Lesu, the men's dances were of one type, the women's of another. The men's dances were strenuous, involved the wearing of elaborate masks, and often re-enacted stories of hunting and heroism. The women's dances were without masks, "were far less elaborate and formed abstract patterns of lines, squares, and circles." Gerardus van der Leeuw (*Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art,* New York, 1963, p. 43) calls the round dance a "procession in a circle," and seems to think of it as primarily a woman's dance. Its theme, he says, is fertility; and the center of the circular dancing ground is occupied by a symbol of fertility, to which the dancers address themselves. In ancient Greece, that symbol was a sacred tree identified with Dionysos; in May Day dances, it is the Maypole.

Professor Honda mentions Bon dances in Akita Prefecture where only the women of the town, as a rule, "gather together and dance around a fire made in the middle of the town road."[10] In these dances, married women wear a black hood that covers the face except for the eyes; young "blooming girls" wear a special straw hat, and no hood; and the girl children just a *tenugui* (towel) tied round the top of the head.[11]

But perhaps it is misleading to suggest that this outdoor, summer round dance might be thought of as a "woman's dance." Surely it is not generally enjoyed only by women. And, more to the point: a festival tends to redefine, reinforce, and re-energize the socially accepted distinctions between male and female, the man's role and the woman's. Thus while the carrying of the heavy, full-size *mikoshi* falls within the domain of distinctly masculine activity, to appreciate its significance within the total cycle of the festival one has to look for the interplay between the sexes that is present along the sidelines and subliminally. I think James Kirkup has perceived this kind of pattern in the *bon odori,* for in his descriptions there is always the suggestion of a strong contrast between the naked energy of the drummer, at the center of the circles, in his "bamboo tower with a roof of reed," and the "beauty and frailty" of the young girls dancing around below, their yukata sleeves fluttering "like banners or wings," making them look like "moths or butterflies."[12] Here the folkdance phase of the festival again states the basic theme of the festival, which is a celebration of masculine energy (the last phases of the festive cycle, the *kagura* and the rites done at the sanctuary, will be done by men alone, with women present only as spectators in the first instance, and not present at all in the latter); yet it also serves as a kind of counterpart to the *mikoshi* procession. In the procession, the boys exert themselves wildly, pushing their energies to the limit, while the girls (in bloom, as Honda would say) huddle in little groups and admire (while hardly seeming to notice). But in *bon odori,* the girls are in the majority, and it is they who are now making the effort (but in a feminine, graceful way), while just one boy at a time performs masculine feats of strength and effort. The young man is still a show-off; and the drum is clearly the centerpiece of the dance; but the *bon odori* is the girls' night to shine. And despite the masculine tendency to describe the dance as simple and "requiring little effort," James Kirkup is refreshingly honest about it: "I took note of the steps of the dance and the movements

10. Honda, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
11. *ibid.*, p. 50.
12. Kirkup, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

of the hands," he says, "and later practised them at home, but it was much more difficult than it looked."[13]

A typical *bon odori* circle may move either in a clockwise or a counter-clockwise direction. The dancers will walk (words like float or glide come to mind) forward a few paces, moving their arms in graceful sweeps that are in harmony with their steps. The palms of their hands are very flat, with the fingers often curved back, as though stretched to the limit. These are very expressive hands, creating artful *mudras.* The motions of the dancers' hands and arms seem to me the sort of motions that women of ages past made at spinning wheels. They are movements of great skill, yet very delicate, as though the dancer were winding and weaving some invisible silken thread in the warm summer air. They are movements that suggest adroit and delicate hands, long and slender. Sometimes the dancers call out the refrain: "Hai, hai!" or "Yoi, yoi!" (Honda explains that these are just *hayashi-kotoba,* or music-words, exclamations that have no special meaning.) The dancers stop, turn and face the center, take a few steps forward (thus contracting the circle), clap, step backwards (expanding the circle back to its original size), clap again, turn in the direction of the circle, advance a few paces, their arms threading the air; they stop again, turn to the center, and the circle contracts in a gesture of drawing together, and then expands again in a gesture of growth and renewed motion. As the circle starts to flow again, there is little movement below the waist, for the summer *kimono* is wound tight, but the feet turn way out, and the *kimono* curves dramatically to accommodate the *tabi*'d ankle and foot. "How beautiful are the feet . . ." Handel's music sings; what a splendid Shintoist he would have made! Each dancer is a picture of concentration now. The older women are the smoothest; old age is truly a time of fulfillment in Japan, especially for the women. It is difficult for the Western observer not to wax romantic in the presence of this dance. "It was . . . beauty produced at very little cost," writes Kirkup. "The gaiety and beauty and charm are already there in the hearts and bodies of this remarkable people: these attributes are always present, and require little decoration, for they are in themselves priceless adornments of the human spirit."[14]

But here is the old problem of *li* and *jen* (to use the Confucian terms): when you see a gracious person doing gracious things, what are

13. *ibid.*, p. 260.
14. *ibid.*, p. 262.

you watching? Are you watching a gentle person expressing his gentility through the vehicle of artful manners, or are you watching etiquette and custom and style nurturing and eliciting a truly human response from the person? Confucius said that human-heartedness comes before one can master the outward forms of humaneness; Hsün Tzu says that the inner humanity will not develop without the training and restraints that learning the outward forms provides. Where would the spirit of the *bon odori* be without the wrapped but flowing lines of the *kimono,* the constancy of the white *tabi,* the circularity of flow, the steady expansion and contraction, the melodious turnings, the sound of the drum on the hazy, heavy air of a hot summer night, mesmerizing and penetrating? Among the Japanese-Americans of Hawaii, I understand, the *kimono* is still worn; but when girls "rehearse" the *bon odori,* they wear blue jeans or *muumuus,* often as not. One of the odd consequences is that, where in the traditional Japanese dance hand and leg movements oppose (as you step forward on your left foot, you extend your right hand), in Hawaian *bon odori* it is now quite common to move the left hand with the left foot, and the right with the right. In the *kimono,* balance is a must, and harmony proceeds from balance; in blue jeans, nothing much matters.[15]

The great Japanese teacher of traditional dance, Hanayagi Kinnosuke, believes that the gestures of all Japanese dance have their origin in a stylization of the basic movements of the farmer and the fisherman. The sweeping motions of the arm and hands, for example, suggest sowing seeds, harvesting the grain, casting and hauling in the nets. Western dance, he says, "tries to thrust the ground away," as in the grand leaps of ballet; Japanese dance "tries to enter into the ground." Western dance is the dance of hunters.[16]

How does it feel to dance the *bon odori?* A lively and expressive woman of seventy-two recently wrote in *Fujin Kôron* that every year she dances the whole evening, from five until eleven, a full six hours without a break. She calls her addiction to folkdancing "this is madness" and "this dementia-like rapture," and says it is "like the intense joy of being in love." And she wonders whether what she feels is anything like the

15. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

16. James Kirkup, *Tokyo* (London, 1966), p. 64. As to the form of the *bon odori* song itself, Bownas (*op. cit.*, p. 101) remarks that structurally it is composed of four-line stanzas, with a syllable count of 7-7-7-5. That makes for a very different kind of balance from the 5-7-5 of *haiku* and *senryu* poetry, or the 5-7-5-7-7 of *tanka.*

ecstasy of tribal peoples she has read about. "When I dance with make-up, the red obi, and the *amigasa* (a woven hat), I can no longer tell whether I am myself, or someone else. My mind is in a sort of *muga* state (selflessness, annihilation of ego consciousness)." She says she often thinks of this while dancing "amid the crowd." Again, if this is possession, it is possession that requires the support of true community, and proceeds out of the intimacy of this kind of total participation in the actions of the group. (Jacques Lipchitz, asked recently about "inspiration," said: "It is a very real thing. I start with something I know what it is. Then comes something I don't know, an unknown collaboration. You look at a dervish. He walks into the room like you and me. He starts to turn, and then comes ecstasy. But if he doesn't start to turn, the ecstasy doesn't come."[17]) The *bon odori* dancer may be transported, she may be "beside herself," but not until after she "starts to turn."

What do the shrine priests think of the folkdance as part of the town's response to the *kami*'s annual visit? "Well, we never have folk-dancing on the shrine grounds," on said; "maybe they have it in the town, I don't know." Another said: "I don't know much about it. Each town may have its own dance." And another: "Some towns hold a dance, some don't. It has nothing to do with the shrine." And still another: "*Saaaa.* I'm not very well informed about that. In my area, it isn't done very much, I think."

2 FAIRGROUNDS

Fairs, I have read, began with festivals. The festival provided the occasion and the setting for the fair: a place where people exchange crafts and goods, a place where people entertain themselves. Festival time, as my politician-friend observed, is a good time for people to come together. And since the celebrants will flock to the church, temple or shrine, the logical place to set up shop is along the avenues and byways that lead to the holy place and (if the clerics do not object) on the

17. *The New York Times* for August 23, 1971. If the elderly lady dancing the *bon odori* becomes possessed, by what or by whom is she possessed? If she were dancing her welcome to the spirits of the departed, one might say she was possessed by family ghosts. If she were dancing to welcome the *ujigami* to her town, we might suspect she was possessed of the *kami*. But no one I met placed that interpretation upon the dance, nor upon the trance-like rapture of the dancer who dances all night. Were I a Jungian I might suggest: the dancer is possessed by her animus, and the *mikoshi*-bearer by his anima.

sacred grounds themselves. It is the same in India, in Europe, and in Japan.

The grounds of the Tokyo neighborhood shrine, ordinarily vacant and still (except for the daily visit by the track team), are transformed into a busy, noisy, crowded carnival. Little shops in temporary sheds (*roten-shō: ro,* raindrops; *ten,* heaven; *shō,* shop—a shop that is open to the raindrops from heaven) line the main path, from the *torii* to the *haiden,* and all the by-paths. In fact, every bit of available space is used, and sometimes the bazaar spills out into the streets, beyond the *torii.* The grounds are decorated with paper lanterns, and in the afternoon are a child's wonderland, in the early evening, as darkness falls and a certain serenity emerges, a trysting place for lovers; and always, a congenial strolling and shopping place for pairs of older women, exercising their special independence. The outdoor shops offer balloons, cotton candy, tiny goldfish to scoop up and take home in a plastic bag; broiled eel and magic tricks and a shooting gallery; all sorts of fried foods, and comical masks made of plastic (*kappa* and atom boy, red and green *oni, okame* and *hyottoko*); toys and trinkets, dumplings and hot chestnuts, and huge amber-colored lollypops in animal shapes: a deer, a rabbit, an *art nouveau* crane. It is a Coney Island of delights. (Among other special treats, young boys can play *pachinko,* just like their elders, on the shrine grounds. *Pachinko* is a pin-ball game, so named because of the sound the little steel ball makes as it tumbles through the maze (*pa CHIN ko*). *Pachinko* parlors, as gambling dens, are off limits to youngsters under eighteen. But at the *matsuri,* all can play to their hearts' content, and taste the forbidden fruit, under the shadow of the sanctuary.)

The vendors at this shrine carnival may be called *roten-shōnin,* heavenly-showers-shop-people, or open-air marketeers; but usually they are called *tekiya,* or *yashi.* Apparently they were originally snake oil vendors; hence *yashi* ("a showman, a quack, a mountebank, a charlatan," says Kenkyusha, sounding like Roget), a shortened form of *yakushi,* which seems to be the Japanese name for the Hindu sky-god Varuna, when he projects himself as a physician and healer.[18] *Yashi* may be

18. See, for example, Sukumari Bhattacharji's *The Indian Theogony: A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology from the Vedas to the Purānas* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 32. Vishnu (in another of his aspects, that of the vengeful god) seems to have been the cause of the illnesses he cured (tuberculosis, physical deformity and premature decay, fears, paralysis, swelling, and "unlucky marks in a woman"), thereby setting a very poor example indeed for Japan's medicine men.

further contracted to *ya,* as in *ya-sama* (Mr. Medicine Man); or *ya-teki-ya* (a medical shop, and hence the man who manages one), which can be further simplified to become: *teki-ya* ("a faker, a racketeer, a street-booth keeper"). The *tekiya* themselves are not fond of these names because in the popular mind, they belong in the same category as *yakuza* ("a good-for-nothing, a worthless scamp, a ne'er-do-well, a rascal, a bad egg, a gambler, a gangster, a mobster") and *gurentai* (juvenile delinquents). But, say the *tekiya,* "We never gamble, like the gang people. We are just merchants. It is just a business. And we have to earn a living too."

But I was constantly told by my neighbors and my colleagues and friends: "Be careful. They are very rough people." They were not rough to me. They are indeed a marginal people, a people on the fringe of the economy. Their faces are lined with fatigue and care, and browned by the sun and wind. They travel from festival to festival, setting up shop, and hoping for good weather and a good crowd. It is a matter of survival with them. They have a saying: "It takes just three straight days of rain to kill a *tekiya.*" They are organized into feudal guilds, called *kumiai,* to which they owe total loyalty. They share a secret language, with code words; they participate in secret "blood brother" rites (drinking a drop of one another's blood in a cup of *sake*); and they have a secret handshake. Many have special nicknames; I heard of one who was called Takohachi, because he makes and sells octopus pancakes (*takoyaki*) at his stall. The recipe calls for flour, egg and water, and just a dab of octopus, fried and served up in a soy soup, at ¥50 per pancake.

How do these colorful, gypsy-like people come to have a reputation for being hooligans and thugs? They are a little like circus people. They have to show a happy face to the public, who are to them (and to their way of life) total outsiders. But among themselves they often fight bitter battles and bear bitter grudges. And every now and then it ends in a knifing, and a body is found in the street, with no one seeming to know anything about it. Their quarrels also hinge on matters of survival. Each group has an *oyabun,* a boss, who has total authority, total power over the group. It is the boss' job to go to the shrine grounds just before the festival, ascertain how much space is available for stalls, and then

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The Japanese *tekiya* are said to worship a Chinese god of medicine, who is usually referred to as Shinno-sama, whom I take to be this Yakushi, the Hindu Bhesajatvāya (*bhisaja* means drugs). The *tekiya* guilds are sometimes called *shinno-kumiai,* and the guild's *oyabun* (boss) may be called Shinno-san.

apportion the space. A merchant's profits depend on the location of his stall. The place nearest to the *haiden* of the shrine is a choice spot; next to the *torii* is another choice location. And the choice locations may be fought over, and jealousies develop and feuds begin. The reputation of a guild boss depends on his ability to apportion the site with a minimum of discontent, and to mediate disputes. It is not an easy job. Once the festival is under way, and the fairgrounds in full swing, he collects about ¥200 from each stall manager, to cover the cost of lights, and of the clean-up afterwards. It may also cover a small contribution "to the *kami-sama,*" something like a rental fee paid to the shrine—though neither priest nor merchant-chief care to think of it in such worldly terms.

So where the ordinary shop keeper lives a pretty drab, routine existence, these *tekiya* men and women are known to live exciting and dangerous lives, surviving only by their wits, and by the archaic social code and tight bonds of *giri* that keep them together as a sub-culture, and apart from the polite society of uptown and down. They are wrinkled, weather-beaten, wise-looking quaint people, the old men with white hair, the young men with brisk, circus-barker mannerisms, the old women wrapped in bright colored shawls. They add an element of excitement and daring to the festival, with their bazaar. And if you find yourself occasionally overcharged, or if the merchandize in the bag is not quite what you saw on the counter, you will probably go home happy, feeling that it was worth it, and that it's all part of the fun of *o-matsuri.* The *tekiya* are part of the entertainment, and so is dealing with them. And as they say, "We have to make a living too."

But not all are rogues. The great majority are, I think, quite honest; and many have extraordinary skills, both as craftsmen and as showmen. One such had a small stall; on his counter was a large square wooden box, with a square wooden cover, set into the counter; beside it, also set into the counter, he had little painters' cups, and tiny paintbrushes. In the box he kept a very gooey, and very chewy taffy; in the cups, various bright colors of vegetable dye. When I came upon him, he had just finished making a candy sculpture of exquisite detail, a little girl jumping rope, made of taffy, and on a stick. Up stepped his next order; *"Uma!"*—make me a horse. He lifted the lid of the magic box, and dipped out a fistful of the gooey stuff with his hand, and restored the lid. From under the counter he took a wooden stick; then he shaped the taffy into a round ball, and pushed in the stick. Holding the blob by the stick with one hand, he pulled at it with the front

fingers of his other, and produced a longish nob, which he then gave an artful twist. It was a perfect horse's head! A crowd began to gather round. Now he produced, again from under the counter, a pair of those snub-nosed scissors with great looping wicker-covered handles, of the sort one sees in flower shops. Two quick nips at the top of the head, a bit of a squeeze with the fingers, and the horse had two perfect pointed ears; another nip and he had a mouth, open, as though he were breathing hard. Now he quickly and deftly shaped the body, nipped hard at its four corners, and out came four legs, which he put great ingenuity into; one came out stiff and nearly straight, its mate bent under, as in a canter. Then he dipped a brush into the black dye, and quickly dotted in the eyes; another brush went in the red, and outlined the mouth. Now he opened his wood box again, and everybody leaned forward to see what would happen next. He reached in for just a twist of taffy, dabbed it with red, and then kneeded it between his forefingers, and there it was: a pretty pink ribbon tied round the horse's neck. The whole was swished about briefly to dry, then popped into a plastic bag and rubber-banded, and handed to the proud young lady, who handed the master artist two crisp hundred-yen notes. Now the less affluent children pressed forward, and requested the ¥20 special: an unadorned glob of taffy on a stick. The crowd began to drift away, but he did a brisk business in plain taffy, and an occasional request for more of his candy sculptures.[19]

Many of the toys on sale at this festival stalls are simply not to be seen in the stores. For example: a rubber frog, with long flat legs folded under him, and a rubber bulb on a long tube. "It doesn't really work on land," the *tekiya* woman explains, "because the body is heavy. But it is hollow, and in water, it floats. So it works fine in the bathtub." It did. You float the frog, squeeze the bulb, and the little legs snap out as they inflate instantly, giving the frog a start forward that is astoundingly life-like. As you press the bulb repeatedly, the frog appears to swim about the tub, sometimes using the rim for his springboard. I have seen plastic imitations of this toy in the stores, and they work for a day or two, then spring a leak where the air tube and body join, loose their spunk, and have to be scrapped. But the *tekiya* version is rugged, and continues to lunge about with froglike gravity for many a happy month.

I managed two very long and very illuminating interviews with a

19. "This is Japan," Asahi's annual for 1963, carried pictures and some text on these remarkable artisans.

tekiya boss whose headquarters was an *o-senbei* (rice cracker) shop just around the corner from my home. It was his wife's shop, he said, but he could always be reached there. He had no office, after all, and no fixed location. I offered to meet him there, but he always insisted on coming to my home—much to the discomfort of my landlady. Perhaps he was just curious to see how a foreigner lives; that would account for the first time, anyway. He told me he had been a *tekiya* merchant for forty-odd years, and was now sixty-three. He has three young men working for him personally, and as many shrines in Tokyo have monthly festivals (*ennichi*) in addition to the annual festival, he goes only to the most profitable festivals, and only when he has time; otherwise, he sends in his assistants. At one shrine they sell brooches; at another, brooches, *zori,* and *geta;* at a third, brooches, chopsticks, and stockings; at a fourth, *zori,* and, on January 1, 2, and 3, *engimono:* rice balls affixed to a willow branch, a charm that brings happiness for the new year. But his big day is the fourth, fourteenth and twenty-fourth of every month, when he sets up shop at Togenuki Sugamo Jizō (splinter-removing Jizō), where the elderly and the infirm flock for magical cures. There he sells only a special incense that is said to have healing powers. "It is the biggest festival in Tokyo," he told me. "I have been going there for twenty years." When he said "I have been going there," he meant that he never misses sending his young assistants; but he himself is rarely to be seen behind the booth, at any festival.

Do *tekiya* merchants work at places other than shrines and temples? Yes, they are also street merchants. You will find them in various locations around Tokyo, squatters with flimsy stalls lining otherwise vacant backstreets and alleyways. Had he ever worked at any thing else? Well, after the war, the shrines were desolate, so he tried selling pottery in a squatter shop of that kind. That failed, so he tried selling *tabi.* Then, around 1952 or 1953, the shrines began to come back to life, and he was able to go back to his old work. Around 1959, his wife opened the *o-senbei* shop. Does he have any other enterprises going for him? Well, yes, he takes care of all the electric lights at all the festivals; "I also provide all the electric cords and accessories; I rent them to the shopkeepers." How large a territory is he responsible for? All of Toshima-ku, and all of Bunkyo-ku! It is the largest territory managed by any of the Tokyo bosses. (As the conversation developed, I found his fingers in several pies outside his own territory as well; he works a number of busy shrines in the commercial district of Tokyo—with the permission of the boss of that territory, of course, and a little kick-back.)

What is the economics of *tekiya* merchandising? "I pay cash, and so I get my goods at a cheaper price, and can afford to sell at a cheaper price." How do festival prices compare with store prices? "Much of what we sell is special. Goods you can't buy in stores. Like papier-mache lion masks. But where a comparison can be made, our goods are cheaper." Are your *geta* cheaper than the ones sold in stores. "Yes. The price is lower. But they aren't very good quality!"

Will his son inherit his position when he retires? "My son graduated Hosei University, and went to work as a salary man, with a large company. I was very happy, because this is no life for a man, and I didn't want him to follow in my footsteps. He is very intelligent. But he couldn't take the nine-to-five office grind, so he quit, and now he works for me. Sometimes his ideas are different from other people's, though." Will he succeed you as boss? "If my son wants it, he'll get it!" How do his views differ from those of the others? "He believes in resolving differences by talking things out, not by quarreling." Do the older men respect him? "50–50." (I had the impression the young man's college education was something of an obstacle for him, among these post-graduates of the school of hard knocks.)

What changes have you seen, over the years? "In the old days, there were many more quarrels, and murders." And now? "Now they all obey me." Are pretty much the same goods sold now as then? "Yes, almost the same. Though there are many more food shops now." Any changes within the guild of merchants? "Well, at ceremonies, we used to drink a cup of *sake* with the others' blood mixed in. Now we just put a bit of salt into the *sake* instead. Drinking it means you pledge yourself to obedience to the boss at all times. And if anything happens to any of my men, I provide for their families for life."

Do you have any dealings with the shrine priests? Only at one shrine, he said, which "has some very old buildings, national treasures. So the priest comes out to warn us of the fire danger, and to see that no stalls are set up too near the buildings. He is also worried about having the walls marred or scratched." Does the shrine charge a fee for use of its grounds? "No, no charge. But I collect ¥100 from each merchant, and give a gift to the shrine. We give about ¥2,000 to one shrine, at least ¥3,000 to another (my neighborhood shrine), and, to the largest, five or six thousand yen." And how much do you collect from each merchant in other fees? "¥100 for electric, ¥30 for cleaning the grounds."

Do you have any dealings with the *ujiko* of the neighborhood

shrine? *"Ujiko kanka nashi!"* he said loudly and distinctly (he was a very soft-spoken man, ordinarily). "The laity are without influence." Neither they nor the priests have anything to do with which merchants come, what they sell, or who is in charge of the fairgrounds. That is all up to the *tekiya* boss, and he will resent even the suggestion that someone else might be involved in the planning. This is his territory, and others had better tread lightly on it.

For the priests' point of view, I quote from random conversations with them.

Priest No. 1. Q. Who is the boss of the *tekiya* who work your shrine?
Ans. I don't know.
Q. Do they contribute to the shrine at all?
Ans. Only cleaning charges.

Priest No. 2. Q. Who are the *tekiya* who work at your shrine?
Ans. (he laughs) I don't really know much about them. Their boss comes the day before the festival, and allots each man his space. Then, at the end of the festival, he comes again, bows, says thank you, makes a gift to the *kami,* and leaves. That's all I see of them.... I don't want to be familiar with such people!

Priest No. 3. (my neighborhood priest).
Q. Who are the *tekiya* here?
Ans. I can't remember the boss' name. He arranges it all. He sells apricots, just to the right of the shrine entrance. (The district boss, interviewed above, identified this apricot vendor as his deputy.) I have no connection with them, so I don't know how they assign spaces. The boss comes every year, just to say hello. I think there is a city-wide *tekiya* organization that decides who is in charge of which district. (That organization was identified by my *tekiya* boss as the Tokyo Gaisho Kyodo Kumiai, with offices at Minami Inaricho, near Ueno Station. He named the over-chief of the organization, and all the sub-chiefs. Each of the sub-chiefs—(*riji* is the proper term)—is in charge of one ward of the city. He said he was the most important of the group, because he has charge of two wards. He named all the *riji,* and all their deputies; but I was told by a specialist in the field that they are probably all front men, and not the real bosses, and that the T.G.K.K. is just a

front too, an organization whose task is to improve the public image of the *tekiya,* which has been badly damaged by infiltration by *yakuza,* involvement in the black markets after the Pacific War which led to gang wars, and so on.)

Q. Do you think they have gangster connections?

Ans. (he laughed) Do you think so? (more laughter) I don't have any idea. I only see them once or twice a year. I am not on friendly terms with them.

Q. Are you ever tempted to interfere with what they sell on the shrine grounds, and what entertainments they offer?

Ans. I never offer them my opinion. They have to obey the law, and follow the rules laid down by the police.

Q. Are the laity ever tempted?

Ans. The *ujiko* aren't concerned with them (he reflected for a moment). Once one of our *ujiko* wanted to man a stall here at the festival. He had to get permission from the *tekiya* boss. He also had to pay a tribute to the boss.

Q. You don't charge them rent.

Ans. No, never. But they do give some money to the shrine as thanks.

Priest No. 4. (not in Bunkyo-ku).

Q. Who is the boss of the *tekiya* here?

Ans. A Mr. Sato. I think there are five or six big bosses in Tokyo, and he is one of them. But I don't have much contact with him. He just comes in to say hello each time we hold a festival.

Q. Does he contribute to the shrine?

Ans. No. The *tekiya* stalls draw in people, and the people toss coins into the shrine box. That's all.