



The Boat Festival of Koza

By A. B. Lopian*

Being in Japan in the spring and summer season gives the visitor, especially if he happens to be in Kyoto, many opportunities to witness various festivals, which are so much part and parcel of Japanese life and culture. Between the vernal and autumnal equinoxes we have had, for example, the Cherry-blossom Festival at Daigo-ji in April; the more than ten centuries old Aoi Matsuri in May; the Gion Matsuri, which began in the 9th century and is celebrated annually in July; the Daimonji Festival in August; etc. Although very much impressed by the huge and enthusiastic crowds that turned up, fascinated by the colourful pageantry on display, while at times moved by the devoted and serious faces of participants in certain rituals, I could not help wondering how many of the spectators and participants still believe in the traditional rites. How many are only carrying on with tradition for the sake of group solidarity, and how many—like this visitor—have come just to satisfy a curious nature and to enjoy the spectacle as a tourist. I also felt admiration for the skill of the organizers of such large-scale festivals, but at the same time I regretted that more and more commercial interests are finding their way into gatherings of an essentially religious nature, just as we see elsewhere during Christmas festivities, where the religious element is being pushed to a secondary position.

Therefore, I consider myself very fortunate to have had opportunity to witness other kinds of festivals, where the commercial element was less apparent and traditional beliefs were still the main motivating factor. Among these, the boat festival of Koza was of special interest to me as it concerned a fishing village on the southeastern coast of the Kii peninsula, and is, therefore—unlike the Mifune Matsuri in Kyoto, which is celebrated annually in the month of May at the Kurumazaki shrine in

Saga, where one can see beautifully decorated boats floating down the Oi river against the magnificent scenery of Arashiyama—a festival of seagoing people and their boats.

Always interested in matters of a maritime nature, I immediately jumped at the idea when Professor Maeda Narifumi of the Center proposed a field trip to the southern part of Wakayama prefecture to see the boat festival, which is held every year at the Koza river. As other members of the Center were too busy during the summer, I was the only one who joined him on this trip.

Thursday morning, the 23rd of July, 1981, we left Kyoto and headed south, driving in dry, hot summer weather through the old historical province of Yamato. In the mountain area to the south we enjoyed views of the grandiose Yoshino landscape, and only then and did I fully realize why this area had inspired so many poets, and why emperors and princes of bygone days had gone there seeking refuge against hostile attacks. Further on we traversed the equally ancient Kumano district of the Kojiki tales. We had time to stop at the Hongu shrine, and later were able to admire the 140-meters-high waterfall of Nachi. Finally, after a short drive along the Pacific coast, we arrived at the town of Koza.

Although it was past six in the evening, the long summer day allowed us to go straight to the area where the main ceremony was to be held. It lies about three kilometers inland near the Koza river, on a stretch of beach facing the sacred island of Kochi. We expected that the people would already be busy making preparations for the festivities, but were rather disappointed to find the place deserted and empty. But we made the most of the situation and enjoyed the quiet and peaceful atmosphere. As the rays of the setting sun dimmed, the bright greens of the surrounding forest darkened by the moment, as did the slow current of the river below, and the place assumed a rather eerie ap-

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pearance. One could easily understand why, of all places, this part of the river bend formed by the tiny island, had been for many centuries a sacred spot for worship. The old road along the river followed the river's curve, then entered a short tunnel that modern technology had pierced through a hill, and emerged abruptly upon the holy place.

As it was getting darker we decided to go back to the town and register in the local hotel where a room had been reserved. During previous field trips to the area, staff members of the Center had made it their headquarters, and we were warmly received as old guests. The owner proved to be a prominent figure in the district. He thus became an important source of information on local affairs. He said that the festival had started and at the moment a special ceremony was going on. He suggested that we postpone our dinner and go right away to the town's main shrine. We were taken in his car, and, indeed, a great number of people had assembled at the place. We discovered that an eight-member group from Keio University led by Dr. Miyake Jun and a bigger group from the Kokugakuin University in Tokyo, headed by Professor Sakurai Mitsuru and consisting of 28 people, were also present to see this unique event. In addition, there was a lady anthropologist from Spain. When I was introduced to the ward-chief, Mr. Katamori Kazuo, who was ex-officio also in charge of the whole festival organization, he remarked that I might discover some similarities with Southeast Asian customs, especially the lion dance which, it is believed, must have been imported from the southern region. The very few Japanese words at my command were not sufficient to let him know that, in fact, my real motive in coming to this southeastern part of Wakayama prefecture was to look for evidence of Southeast Asian contacts with the local culture. So I merely smiled and nodded hopefully.

The ceremony being held that evening was for the purification of participants, who had to be cleansed of all kinds of contamination with bad elements before they were allowed to take part in the festival's rituals. After the ceremony we returned to the hotel for dinner and retired early as we had rather a full day behind us and had to gather new energy for the following days.

A description of the Koza Boat Festival would, of course, fill many pages and would outgrow the size of this Field Report. But there are such scholarly writings as the article jointly written by

Takazaki Masahide, Obata Kiichiro, Kobayashi Shigemi, and Sakurai Mitsuru, and also the anthropological study by Winston Davis, which should provide more information to those who want to know more about the event. Moreover, the reports of the teams who followed the festival from beginning to end should give more details.

This year's festival began on the 23rd of July with the above ablutional rites in the Shinto shrine, and lasted three full days. On the 24th (Friday), after ceremonies at the same shrine and at the harbour side, in which a sacred tablet was handed over to the leader of each of the three *mifune*, these ceremonial boats departed upstream for the island of Kochi, where they stayed until the next day.

Early Saturday morning the townspeople went in a procession of boats to the same spot. They followed a special vessel, the *Tofune*, which was carrying the *Jorosan*, three blessed children who were regarded as representatives of deities, to whom, as I found out later, people came to offer their respects. We were invited to take part and boarded one of the other vessels.

According to tradition, the festival started in the 12th century during the civil war between the Heike and Genji, when the head of the Minamoto appealed to the people of Kumano for help. The villagers of Koza, who then consisted mostly of fishermen, sent a contingent of boats and troops to assist, and during their absence the remaining villagers held rituals at Kochi and chanted prayers to secure their safe return. In gratitude for their victorious return, the people of Koza have celebrated every year since. At the same time it became an occasion for the seagoing people to pray for a good catch of fish and a safe voyage at sea.

Owing to the relative remoteness of the place, this festival lacked the touristic and commercial character of those held in and around big cities. Yet one could still enjoy the pagentry of decorated boats and colourful costumes, which made it a very attractive spectacle, and the boat races of schoolboys clad in red, blue, and yellow robes, together with several groups performing lion dances, provided some form of excitement. The hot summer day was also an occasion for many people to enjoy swimming in the fresh water of the stream. (Do we find here a parallel with the ritual bathing of Indians in the holy Ganges river?) Moreover, the free Saturday afternoon was a good day for a joyous family picnic near the sacred island. It was surely an excellent occasion to foster social bonds and a sense of belonging among members of the com-

munity.

The atmosphere of intimacy, which, even to the foreigner, became almost tangible when, towards the middle of the night, the three *mifune*, now finely illuminated with festive paper lanterns, circled solemnly around the sacred island while the men on board sang old songs, revoking memories of the civil war, against a background of flute music and the rhythmic splashing of oars, was an experience I will always cherish. Sitting beside me on the sand, watching the ships float by in the dark, was an old man from British Columbia. He told me how he had emigrated in his youth across the Pacific, but had always dreamed of coming back once to see this festival in his home town, and, finally, this year his dreams had been fulfilled. As a boy he also used to take part in the boat races. Perhaps the prospect of a hard life as a fisherman had made him to move away, never to become part of the adult fishing community that was now continuing the age-old customs as former generations had taught them. The following morning I met others who had left and found employment in such cities as Shingu, or the more distant Nagoya, Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe. They, too, must have lost the sense of total involvement in the rituals. Yet all of them have returned to take part in the festivities to re-live something of their nostalgic past.

I had a chance encounter with Mr. H. Yasuda, who had taught at the Shihan-gakko in Makassar (now Ujung Pandang) in South Sulawesi during the war, and also with his colleague, who taught in Medan in North Sumatra. It was a pleasant surprise indeed. But, of course, this was not the kind of relations with Southeast Asia which I was trying to find here. There was the lion dance, which is also known in Southeast Asia, but in many places it is only part of the culture of immigrant Chinese. However, some Southeast Asian civilizations do know traditional mask dances.

On the way home from Kochi island the people were throwing water at each other, which reminded me of certain festivities in mainland Southeast Asia. A similar custom I have also observed in

Ternate, when at Chingming (Chinese holiday to honour the dead), the local Chinese community used to hold a joint picnic at the beach, from which everybody had to return with wet clothes. Whether all these customs have the same symbolical meanings or have originated from different principles is a matter of further study. I am more inclined to see here an expression of group solidarity. Everybody must get wet, so even the grandmother in the boat behind us, and the staid-looking professor in our boat, were lavishly splashed with (holy?) water from the Koza river amid cries of hilarity from the young crowd.

Our short visit naturally would not be sufficient to establish theories of cultural contacts between Japan and Southeast Asia, despite some similarities that we have seen in the local customs and behaviour of the people. A more systematic plan for research is needed, involving many scientific disciplines, especially those related with the life of peasants and fishermen. Since the early wave(s) of immigrants from the south is supposed to have arrived in prehistoric times, it would not be the field of an ordinary historian who usually works with inscriptions, archives, and other written sources. However, in the boat festival of Koza, where the land people of nearby villages come every year to perform religious rites at this sacred spot together with the seagoing fishermen from Koza, and also in the ceremonies where black stones of the land are joined with water from the sea, we can detect a symbolical meeting of land and sea, as in the case of the Indonesian *tanah* (land) and *air* (water), the union of which gave birth to the concept of *tanah air* (fatherland) of the Indonesian people. It is also interesting to observe that the ward-chief believes that some features, like the lion dance, came from Southeast Asia. It would be worthwhile to find out whether this belief is based on old tales passed on from generation to generation, or has taken root among other local traditions because of an acquaintance, however vague, with academic theories advanced by speculating scholars. (**Visiting Scholar, 1981, The Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University**)