

The Traditions and Culture of Fuchu City "The Kurayami Matsuri"

The other day, during the lunch break, I interviewed several students and asked them, "When you think of the traditions and culture of Fuchu City, what comes to mind?" Perhaps because of the moment of year, almost all of them answered, "The Kurayami Matsuri". A few students, however, mentioned "komatsuna (Japanese mustard spinach)" and "New Year's bonfires (Dondoyaki)."

"Kodomo mikoshi ga hajimaruyo!(Kodomo Mikoshi are starting! )You can get sweets and ice cream! (Don, Don — the sound of drums!)"

Wearing hanten jackets, junior high school students march through the streets chanting these words to a rhythmic and distinctive melody. This scene is a familiar tradition of the Kurayami Matsuri. Drawn by this call and the tempting promise of sweets and ice cream, elementary school children gather, and the procession of the Kodomo Mikoshi—togyo(渡御), the act of carrying a portable shrine through the town—begins.

In fact, when I was in elementary school, hearing this call made me feel quite gloomy. Why did I feel that way? My grandfather loved festivals, and whenever the Kurayami Matsuri began, he would constantly be at the kaisho (会所) —the gathering place for festival participants—in Kyozu (京所), an old place name referring to the area around Miyamachi (宮町) 2-chome and 3-chome.



Naturally, as a festival enthusiast, he strongly encouraged me, his grandchild, to carry the Mikoshi.

At the time, when I was in the lower grades of elementary school, I was very skinny and relatively tall for my age. I had a slender build and, of course, little physical strength. I did not feel particularly resistant to the idea of carrying the Mikoshi, and I certainly wanted the sweets and ice cream. However, there was one serious and very practical problem.

A mikoshi is carried by many children. With the carrying poles resting on their shoulders, they chant "hoissa, hoissa" (at the Kurayami Matsuri, it is not "wasshoi") while lifting and swaying it up and down and from side to side. For me, this was the real difficulty. Because I was tall, the full weight of the Mikoshi and the impact of its movement bore directly down on my shoulders. I even tried crouching down while carrying it, but that only put a heavy strain on my legs and was extremely painful.

For me, carrying the Mikoshi was nothing but an ordeal. Eventually, I stopped carrying the Kodomo Mikoshi altogether. From then on, during the Kurayami Matsuri, I spent my time pulling festival dashi(山車) or beating the drums instead. After I became a junior high school student, I began helping out as a volunteer, assisting with festival security.

Have you ever thought about why it is called the Kurayami (Darkness) Matsuri(Festival)?

First, let us review what a Mikoshi(神輿) is. The word Kami (神) in Mikoshi refers to a deity or god, and Koshi (輿) means a vehicle carried by people. In other words, a Mikoshi is understood as a vehicle in which a deity rides.

Because deities are considered extremely sacred beings, it was believed that they should not be seen directly by human eyes. For this reason, Mikoshi needed to be carried late at night, under the cover of darkness. This practice is the origin of the name "Kurayami Matsuri.(Darkness Festival)"

According to my grandfather, in the past, Mikoshi were indeed carried through the town in complete darkness in the middle of the night. However, because it was so dark, there were many serious injuries and various troubles. As a result, the schedule was changed to improve safety.

Today, the Mikoshi procession (渡御) takes place from the shrine to the Otabisho (a temporary resting place for the deities) starting at 6:00 p.m. on May 5, and from the Otabisho back to the shrine starting at 4:00 a.m. on May 6. A total of eight Mikoshi—Ichinomiya(一之宮) through Rokunomiya(六之宮) and the main Mikoshi (御本社), Goryogu Mikoshi (御霊宮) —make the round trip, accompanied by six large Taiko drums.

The carriers wear Eboshi caps on their heads and dress in a distinctive white ceremonial costume known as Hakucho (白丁). Each year, approximately 800,000 people gather to attend the Kurayami Festival.

Although the festival is hosted by Okunitama Shrine, its operation is supported by people from the four central districts of the city, known as the Shikacho (四カ町). In addition, groups called Kojū(講中), made up of people from outside Fuchu City—including the Tama area, Kanagawa Prefecture, and Saitama Prefecture—also take part in running the festival.

In this way, Fuchu City's traditions and culture are preserved, passed down, and retold through the efforts of many people across generations.

ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) を活用して英訳しています。  
The English translations are prepared with the support of our Assistant Language Teacher (ALT).

Principal

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〈在籍生徒数〉 一学年231名、二学年249名、三学年218名  
全校生徒数698名

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