

The Roles of Children in Rituals and Festivals
—In a Small Local Area in Wakayama Prefecture—
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The Koza River (Kozagawa) is a long river located in southern Wakayama Prefecture, flowing from a point near the top of Mt. Ohoto on into the Pacific Ocean. This river runs through two towns, Kozagawa-cho and Koza-cho (since 2006, a part of Kushimot-cho). These two towns grew up mainly as trading posts along the Koza River, long before modern means of transportation were developed. In this area three major festivals held. They are the INARI-JINJYA-SAI, held on July 21st and 22nd, the KOUCHI-MATSURI, held on July 24th and 25th and the NEN-NEKO-MATURI held on the first Sunday of December.

At the NEN-NEKO-MATSURI, the heroine of the festival ritual is always a little girl 8 years old or under. She has to carry a heavy bucket on her head and walk slowly step by step in order to calm the earth spirits. It takes her over an hour to reach the sacred place where she prays to the rising sun. But the distance she has to walk is only 150 meters. This ritual ceremony is called “HITOTSUMONO,” (literally: one person), and in the ritual, a young girl, representing a child of a god, steps down on earth and offers prayers for newborn babies and children everywhere that they will be granted peace and happiness and good health. The “HITOTSUMONO”, represents a person whose heart belongs to the gods. She is a specially chosen child who is coming from the gods. Each step she takes is called a “HEN-PAI”. With each step she firmly pushes down on the earth in order to calm the evil spirits below and to wake up the good spirits to meet the coming spring. This girl plays two roles, one is as a HITOTSUMONO, a child from the gods, and the other is in the steps she takes, the HEN-PAI, where as a human being she calms the earth spirits and purifies the earth. The NEN-NEKO-MATSURI was first held some 500 years ago.

As regards the second festival, the KOUCHI-MATURI, it involves a sacred boat ride along the Koza River from Koza Harbor to a special divine place located 3 kilometers away from the Koza Shrine where a ritual takes place by priests. And on the bank of the river facing a small rock island in the middle of the river, a ritual is carried out again. Usually people are not allowed to go onto the island because a god lives in this sacred place. The name of the god is “Kottamasama.” It’s actually the god’s nickname and people love his nickname and respect this god very much, and every year the people there look

forward to the festival. Actually people living in 5 different districts celebrate KOUCHI-MATSURI together. From Koza harbor a special boat approaches the island. The boat is called TOH-BUNE and has 3 children aboard. These children SHOUROU are said to be children of the god. Actually the people on the boat cannot see any image of the god. The god SHOUROU is being represented by the three children who are dressed up in traditional costumes. They sit in a small sacred house set up in a field facing the island. They are shown veneration by the people who visit, and they are also referred to as "HITOTSUMONO," and are an indispensable part of the ritual. The first KOUCHI-MATSURI was held about 800 years ago.

The third festival, the INARI-JINNJA-MATSURI, is typical of the rice harvest festivals held in the countryside and are eagerly awaited by the local people. Villagers give their thanks to their local god. This ritual has a history of more than a 100 years.

The three districts where these three festivals take place, all hold a traditional Lion Dance. And the festivals are dedicated to particular gods. A boy or a girl, 8 years old or under, plays the leading role as a Japanese long-nosed goblin. These artful Lion Dances bring happiness and peace to the people, as they show forth respect to their god who purifies the earth and people. The tradition has been handed down over many, many years. The Lion Dance came to Japan from China. Also a boy or girl has been chosen to represent the god among the villagers. And the steps taken by those performing the Tengu dance are believed to serve as HEN-PAI.

Those traditional festivals and rituals are the cultural heritage of these small villages. They have been handed down from generation to generation for so many years. And these rituals and traditional performing arts must be preserved for the future. But there has been a decline in the population over the last 20 years, and it is becoming difficult to find people who will keep these traditional festivals and rituals going.

And as children play a very significant and valuable role in the rituals and in the performing arts, it is very important that children can be found who can perform in the rituals held in these small districts. The children who perform in these rituals and festivals find great pride in what they do and bring joy and enrichment to so many people.