

Kuwana Ishitori Festival

The name of this festival originates from people looking at stones as deities. During the festival, clean stones are taken from the Machiya River, which flows through the southern part of Kuwana City, and presented as offerings at the Kasuga Shrine, the local Shinto deity. Although Kasuga Shrine is the shrine of the Fujiwara family with the Kasuga Grand Shrine located in Nara serving as the main shrine, its deity was transferred to Kuwana Shrine, the guardian deity of Kuwana. This is an interesting aspect regarding shrines in Japan, that any shrine in Japan easily transfers many famous deities to their local shrine.

When looking at festivals, I see that Japanese people's faith is polytheistic. In other words, I feel that Japanese are an ethnic group with a "hodgepodge" culture that accept anything and everything without any rules.

Let's look at the city of Kuwana. It is a very unique and powerful place.

Geographically speaking, it is the location where the Kiso Three Rivers, Japan's longest rivers meet, and is located right at that mouth of Ise Bay. Since ancient times, Kuwana has flourished as an important port town that divides the Japanese archipelago into east and west. Looking at Japanese history, we see that Kuwana appears in the *Nihon Shoki* (The Chronicles of Japan) under writings about the powerful *Kuwana Obito* clan. During the Edo period, Kuwana prospered in the lodging business

as the 42nd station among the 53 Stations of the Tokaido, and served as a center for supporters of the shogun at the end of the Edo period. Incidentally, since the Meiji government did not allow feudal domains formed by supporters of the shogun to use their prefectural capital names as names for those prefectures, when listening to prefectural capital names it is easy to find out which regions were loyal to the emperor and which were in support of the shogun. In accordance with this, the capital of Mie prefecture is Tsu City.

Festivals are part of the history of the area. Indeed, I am deeply interested in the Ishitori Festival from which I can find out about the Kuwana area and its multilayered history.

In this festival, the 37 festival floats are called *saisha*. The mass media refers to all festival floats as *dashi*. Although I think the name *dashi* probably was the result of an effort by the Meiji government aimed to standardize words throughout the country, I feel that the unique names given to festival floats by local regions should be respected.

Now I will change gears and talk about mountains. After death, the bodies of our ancestors would be buried in the mountains of our hometowns. Mountains were locations where the spirits of our ancestors would rest in peace. The spirits of our ancestors come down to the trees. Therefore, for festivals we build tall structures which are high like mountains, stand up trees, and pull floats through our hometown areas to possibly “meet” with our ancestors. This explains why those structures are

generally referred to *asyama*(mountains).

An overwhelming feature of the Ishitori Festival of Kuwana is its musical accompaniment. Following its label as the “loudest festival in Japan,” it is difficult to have a conversation the closer you get to the sides of the *saisya*. The accompaniment is basically simple, consisting of large drums and gongs that are played rhythmically in quintuple and septuple meters. The mixture of the metallic sound of the gongs, natural sounds of the drums, and wind-like sound of the bamboo flute was superb and sounded to me like a jazz session. Although I heard from people connected with the festival that there are some new residents that complain about the sounds made by these instruments at night, a sign of recent times, the festival was indeed a great sight to behold with women and children also creating the musical accompaniment.