

A REPORT ON THE CHILDREN'S KABUKI IN TONAMI AND KOMATSU, JAPAN

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Scholars have often compared the medieval English mystery plays with their various analogues in the other European countries. Yet I was particularly struck by an article in which Professor Meg Twycross refers to traditional Japanese children's kabuki performed none other than on moveable pageant waggons set up in town squares and at street corners.¹ Certainly, as Professor Twycross noted, there has not been any historical connection between English and Japanese plays performed on pageant waggons; however, I thought their use of pageant waggons might be of interest to academic students, and to practitioners, of the mystery plays. So, in April and May 1999, I went to see some of these children's kabukis performed in Tonami and Komatsu in the Hokuriku Region of Japan. The following is a first-hand description of these performances.

Tonami

According to the *History of the City of Tonami*, the children's kabuki in Tonami started in 1789 or thereabout, as a local record states that the Nishimachi pageant waggon was made in that year.²

The children's kabuki is a part of the spring festival, held on 16 and 17 April, of a local Shinto shrine called 'Demachi-Shinmeigu'. On both of the days, the kabuki is staged in eight fixed places (or the 'stations' if we use the word for the English mystery plays) along a street by the shrine. Just as the mystery plays began as part of the religious feast of Corpus Christi, most (or possibly all) of the Japanese kabukis performed on pageant waggons were of a religious nature and plays are 'offerings' of local residents to the gods worshipped in Shinto shrines on seasonal festivals.

There are three pageant waggons, each hosted by a group from different neighbourhood organisations of the city. It used to be that plays were staged on all three waggons simultaneously, but since 1969 the organisations have been taking turns and only one waggon each year has been used for staging. The festival was much more popular a few decades ago than it presently is, drawing a large crowd from the surrounding area. As a first-time visitor without any previous knowledge of the city, I got the impression that the city is hardly thriving, which may have something to

do with the reduced number of waggons used. When I attended the performances, there was usually an audience of about 20 to 40 mostly local people in addition to those who were involved in the performances themselves. It is, therefore, hardly a big tourist attraction, and for that reason, it presents a better opportunity for me to closely observe the traditional children's kabuki in action than would be the case in a bigger tourist town.

This year, 'Nishi-Machi' or the West Town neighbourhood organisation, staged their plays. The pageant wagon is said to be oldest amongst the three extant waggons. The shape of the wagon is something like a traditional, albeit tiny, wooden Shinto shrine and about five metres above the ground, with its small stage and roof.³ The stage is more than a metre tall from the ground, and underneath it there is a storage space enclosed by wooden panels. The back of the stage is screened off so that the child actors and actresses can appear and disappear from backstage.⁴ The stage is very small, in fact so small that it can only be used by child actors and actresses. In another Japanese town where waggons for adult kabuki exist, the waggons are much bigger.

The most interesting thing about the wagon for the readers of this journal may be the fact that the performance area of the wagon is the so-called 'front-on' type rather than 'side-on' one. Nearly half of the wagon is occupied by the shrine-like structure and the rest of the wagon is the performance area. This is the same in all three waggons in Tonami as far as I can see from their pictures.

In Tonami, I was able to see townspeople moving the wagon along the street. It was pushed forward by about fifteen men. It did not seem a strenuous job to do except when they changed the direction of the wagon, although one must bear in mind that the distances between the stations were not very long.

Komatsu

The children's kabuki in Komatsu is also a part of a spring festival of two shrines, Ubashi Jinja and Hiyoshi Jinja (*Jinja* means shrine), held from 13 to 15 May in the City of Komatsu. The festival is known as the Otabi Festival, *Otabi* here meaning 'travelling', that is, the pageant waggons 'travel' or are drawn along the streets. The earliest mention of pageant waggons in local records dates back to 1766.⁵ Komatsu was formerly an important castle city and is still a major commercial and industrial city in Ishikawa Prefecture. The Otabi Festival is a hugely popular event drawing

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PLATE 1: Pageant Waggon, Tonami

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PLATE 2A: Pageant Waggon, Tonami: 'narrator's' platform to right
PLATE 2B: Pageant Waggon, Komatsu: use of extended stage



PLATE 3: Pageant House, Komatsu

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PLATE 4: Kabuki play in progress, Komatsu: extended platform.



PLATE 5: Pageant Waggon under Rain, Komatsu.

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Plate 6A: Performance, Tonami: 'narrator's' platform to right
Plate 6B: Waggon in transit, Tonami

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PLATE 7A: Waggon in Transit, Tonami
Plate 7B: Performance, Komatsu: 'narrator's' platform to right

many tourists from the surrounding area as well as from all over the country.

Tonami and Komatsu are not very distant from each other. Since the festival in Komatsu seems older than that in Tonami, the former may well have influenced the latter. In fact, the outward appearances of the pageant waggons are generally similar although the waggons in Komatsu looked more colourful than the one in Tonami. Again the waggons there are all 'front-on' types. Many of the waggons in Komatsu seem to have fairly big staging area so that it would be possible to use them 'side-on' if so desired, but as far as I was able to observe when I watched the plays, they never used the waggons in this way.

Regarding the question of the 'front-on' versus 'side-on' stage, it seems to me to be rather hazardous to put heavy weight on one 'side' of a Japanese pageant waggon rather than across one end of it. With their ornate roofs, these waggons are themselves like tiny shrines and fairly tall as well as heavy. It seems to me one might unbalance the waggon when pushing it if excessive weight is placed on one side. Also, the 'end-on' type is versatile in that the dead angle is more limited than in the case of the 'side-on' type. This advantage seemed obvious to me when a station was located in a narrow alley.

A clear difference between the staging of Japanese children's kabuki and many of the modern stagings of the mystery plays is that, as far as I am aware, the former never uses the ground: the actors and actresses always remain on the stage. In fact, in Tonami, the children are forbidden to step on the ground even between the performances, as this is considered to desecrate the holy nature of the performances. However, in Komatsu, I saw *hanamichi* or a narrow strip of raised platform attached to the stage in order to extend it a little so that at a climax of a play, an actor could come forward on the *hanamichi* and be very impressive. In addition, both in Tonami and Komatsu, another, completely detached, platform is placed beside the waggon on which are seated a narrator called *Gidayu* (or 'expositor' to use the vocabulary of the western drama), and one or two musicians.

According to one researcher, there are about 1,150 traditional festivals featuring movable pageant waggons in Japan.⁶ However, only about twenty of them seem to stage plays on the waggon. Yet, I must add that some other festivals feature certain performances on the waggon such as dancing, playing music, traditional magic, singing, Japanese drum performance, puppet plays, and so on. Considering the total number, this is indeed a

country of pageant waggons. It makes me wonder what it would have been like if the Reformation had not crushed the English pageant waggon tradition.

NOTES

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1. *Medieval English Theatre* 14 (1992) 77–94.
2. *Tonamishishi Shiryohen 4 Minzoku, Shaji* ('Resources in the History of Tonami City, 4: Folklore, Shrines and Temples') edited by the Committee for the History of Tonami City (Tonami, 1994) 48–9.
3. In fact, the most traditional pageant waggons used to stage children's Kabuki plays seem to have a quite similar shape of a tiny shrine. In addition to the waggons in Tonami and Komatsu, I have seen pictures of all the waggons of the famous Nagahama festival, which Professor Twycross refers to: see *Hikiyama no Machi* ('The City of Pageant Waggons') edited by the Committee for Preservation of Hikiyama Festival (Nagahama, 1995). However, at Nagahama, there is a very interesting variation. One waggon made in 1774 is shaped just like a ship, because the neighbourhood organisation that owns it is the organisation of the 'Hunamachi', meaning 'shipwrights' town'. It would not be difficult to imagine that the English *Noah* plays also had distinctively shaped waggons.
4. As in mainline adult Kabuki, children's kabuki formerly employed only boys. Yet in recent years girls started to appear in many of these children's kabuki. In fact, I saw a kabuki play in Komatsu in which girls play all parts.
5. According to a leaflet distributed at the performance sites.
6. *Hikiyama no Machi* 59.