

A Bridge of Tradition

~The Past, Present, and Future~

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The Ukedo Rice Planting Dance, a tradition handed down in the Ukedo district of Namie Town, has continued uninterrupted even after the Great East Japan Earthquake and the TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station accident. This perseverance is thanks to the passion of many people who cherish Ukedo as their hometown. The Ukedo Rice Planting Dance is performed as a dedication during the "Anba Festival" at Kusano Shrine, the guardian deity of the district. Although Kusano Shrine was swept away by the tsunami, it was re-built this February. For the people of Ukedo, who are unable to live in their hometown due to the aftermath of the nuclear disaster, the rice planting dance and Kusano Shrine serve as emotional anchors. Even when separated by great distances, these traditions continue to act as a bridge connecting them to their cherished homeland.

Connecting the Ukedo Rice Planting Dance

Supported by Residents, Passed Down to Future Generations

After the disaster struck, the performers of the Ukedo Rice Planting Dance were scattered across the country due to evacuation, making it difficult to continue the tradition. Shigeko Sasaki (74), the president of the Ukedo Performing Arts Preservation Society, was determined not to let the tradition—dating back to the Edo period—fade away. She wrote letters to children who had performed the dance before the disaster. Thirteen of them responded, saying, "I want to dance again." In August 2011, the dance was performed at a revitalization event at Aquamarine Fukushima as a tribute to the victims of the disaster.

Wakana Yokoyama (26), who began performing the dance in fourth grade and now works at the Great East Japan Earthquake and Nuclear Disaster Memorial Museum, initially joined the revival efforts to reunite with friends. Although most of the current members joined after the disaster, and few who danced before remain, she continues to dance with a deep resolve to not let the tradition die.

Takamasa Tamura (50), who became the priest of Kusano Shrine after his predecessor passed away in the disaster, believes the Ukedo Rice Planting Dance and

Unyielding Determination



Ms. Yokoyama explains the Ukedo Rice Planting Dance, offered in dedication, using a video of its pre-disaster performance

Kusano Shrine are inseparably linked. "History and tradition aren't built in just five or ten years. Our ancestors worked tirelessly to protect them, hoping to pass them on to future generations. It's our responsibility to continue this legacy," he passionately stated.

President Sasaki was inspired to continue the tradition by a friend's words: "Dancing is a way to honor the deceased." She admitted that

before the disaster, teaching elementary students to dance was challenging and sometimes discouraging. However, reflecting on the experience, she realized, "The Ukedo Rice Planting Dance, which we had been passing down almost casually, is a unique tradition unlike any other."

Ms. Yokoyama, who has been dancing for about 15 years, lived in Ukedo during the disaster, and her home was swept away. After spending time in evacuation within Fukushima Prefecture, she never stopped performing as a dancer. "This dance has always been a part of Ukedo and remains so even now. In a world where almost everything has been lost, it is the one thing that stayed. For me, it is the thread that connects me to Ukedo," she said with a gentle gaze. All three expressed profound gratitude to those who have supported the revival of the Ukedo Rice Planting Dance and shared their hopes that the Anba Festival and this cherished tradition will continue into the future.



Mr. Tamura explains the history and significance of Kusano Shrine



Ms. Sasaki explains the Ukedo Rice Planting Dance during an online session

Kusano Shrine

The Kusano Shrine is a shrine that protects the safety of fishing boats and fishermen. Established in 715, it boasts a history of approximately 1,300 years. Originally located on Kusano Kojima Island, the shrine was relocated to its current site after the island collapsed. During the disaster, the tsunami swept away the shrine building, and the family of the shrine priest tragically lost their lives. However, the strong determination of locals, committed to rebuilding the shrine cherished and protected by their ancestors, led to its reconstruction this February. The new shrine has a shorter approach—half its original length—and the precinct has been reduced to one-third of its former size. Yet, it continues to attract numerous visitors who come to pay their respects.



The rebuilt Kusano Shrine

Ukedo Rice Planting Dance

The Ukedo Rice Planting Dance is a traditional folk performance that has been passed down in the Ukedo district of Namie Town since the late Edo period. The dance is performed as a dedication during the Anba Festival, held annually on the third Sunday of February, to pray for bountiful harvests, abundant catches, and maritime safety. The performance involves seven Saotome (young women rice planters), seven saizo (rice planters), and two naka-buchi (drummers). Before the disaster, the dance was performed by willing 4th- to 6th-graders of Ukedo Elementary School. However, after that fateful day, the community was scattered, making it difficult to continue the tradition solely with Ukedo Elementary students. To preserve the tradition, participation was opened to people of all ages and regions.

Although the costumes were lost in the tsunami, generous support from many people allowed them to be replaced.

For a year following the disaster, the dancers wore black ribbons (mourning crests) on their shoulders, performing the dance as an expression of remembrance and prayer for the deceased.

Editor's Note:

To address the issue of successor shortage, it is essential to continuously promote traditional culture and performing arts. The voices of residents saying, "Don't let it disappear," and their pride in "a unique tradition like no other" alone are insufficient to ensure its preservation. In today's information-driven society, failing to effectively utilize the internet can be fatal. Therefore, it is crucial to actively publicize and share the traditions that have been passed down to the present day. Providing opportunities for everyone to learn about and engage with these traditions is key. By fostering understanding of the heritage and its appeal, we can nurture a sense of responsibility for its preservation and transmission. Establishing a cycle of sharing the charm of these traditions and securing new participants for future generations will be vital to ensuring their continuity. (Keito Igarashi)