



## Playful Relief

### Folk Performing Arts in Japan after the 2011 Tsunami

This article explores the roles of folk performing arts within the wider context of disaster relief in Japan following the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters. It focuses on two Shinto-based troupes located along the devastated Sanriku coastal region—Kadonaka-gumi Toramai and Unotori Kagura. Both groups perform ludic, entertaining acts as part of their repertoires. Their playful ritual practices draw upon elements of local religious traditions as they provide a form of relief to aid the victims of disaster by helping them rebuild their lives and communities.

KEYWORDS: folk performing arts—Japan—Great East Japan earthquake—disaster—ritual—play—relief

ON MARCH 11, 2011, the earthquakes and tsunami that have become known as the Great East Japan earthquake devastated the eastern coast of Japan's main island of Honshu, leaving in their wake around 19,000 casualties and many more displaced and homeless.<sup>1</sup> The Japanese government, together with domestic and international NGOs, responded by launching a major relief and reconstruction program. This article explores the roles of the folk performing arts within the wider context of this disaster relief. The Great East Japan earthquake devastated the region, exacting huge costs in both property and human life. Among the losses were the scattered communities of performers and supporters of all types of folk performing arts traditions along Japan's northeast coastal region and the destruction of their folk costumes, instruments, and various facilities. In the months after the disaster, these groups were on the receiving end of relief efforts. Concerned individuals, state officials, and scholars worked together to help revive these traditions by providing resources and sponsoring performances.

The central focus of this article is on ritual performances made in the wake of the disaster and their relationship to broader projects of relief and reconstruction. A distinctive feature of these traditional art forms is the frequent use of ludic elements interwoven with Shinto narratives. By identifying these performances as a kind of "playful relief" I seek to reexamine the relationships between religion, disaster, and its aftermath. I propose that while these groups were located decidedly on the margins of enormous and sophisticated humanitarian operations, they were nevertheless key actors in delivering relief. Folk performing arts brought communities back together, facilitated spaces for processing loss and trauma, provided memorials for the dead and bereaved, and energized collaborative projects of renewal. They did this not despite their ludic character, but rather precisely because of it.

This study focuses on two groups located along the Sanriku coastal region of northeast Japan, an area ravaged by the tsunami. Kadonaka-gumi Toramai is a tiger dance group based in the towns of Massaki, Ōfunato City, Iwate Prefecture. Unotori Kagura is a kagura (literally "deity entertainment") group based in Fudai Village, which also lies on the coast of Iwate, about 150 km north of Ōfunato City. Though these groups practice quite different arts, both frequently deploy ludic elements in their performance repertoires. Both groups also draw on traditions of

ritual performances in Shinto shrines, though they are not strictly affiliated with specific denominations.

The following sections locate folk performing art traditions in the context of Japanese religion. I also locate my argument about religion and relief within a broader ritual frame. To do this, I discuss the social and religious backgrounds of the two groups and explore their post-disaster experiences, and I conclude by reexamining the role of folk traditions in contemporary Japan and reflect on how the reaction of these organizations to the 2011 disaster might inform research on religion and disaster relief.

#### “RELIGION,” RITUAL, AND PLAY

Japanese performing arts have a long history, tracing their origins back to ancient times (BRANDON 1993, 143). Today, theater continues to permeate Japanese culture. Many Japanese performing arts traditions are Shinto-based. They are often closely connected with particular Shinto shrines, the narratives they perform are those of Shinto deities (*kami*), they are frequently located within wider Shinto festivals, and they serve a ritual purpose. Folk performing arts traditions, especially in rural communities, express a concern with agrarian cycles and other forms of traditional livelihood as intimately connected with the sacred.

According to famous Japanese folklorist YANAGIDA Kunio (1946), Shinto is centrally focused on interacting with the souls of ancestors. When ancestors die, their souls enter a mountain and become *Yama-no-kami* (deity of the mountain). Every spring these deities come down to the rice paddies of settled agricultural society, and they depart again for the mountain in the autumn. Yanagida argues that the arrival and departure of the *kami* is the origin of the spring and autumn festivals practiced nationally. These folk traditions predate the arrival of Buddhism in the sixth century. Even as Buddhism spread across Japan and became an institutional force that dominated Japan’s religious landscape, these folk traditions were not discarded. Instead, Buddhism was blended with these earlier traditions including, for example, the incorporation of the Buddha’s birthday into the spring festivities.

To understand the social role of contemporary folk traditions, YANAGIDA’S (1969) distinction of festivals between *matsuri* 祭 and *sairei* 祭礼 is instructive. *Matsuri* are local rituals practiced by a limited number of devotees. Their focus is on spiritual and physical purification. These events are often sponsored by Shinto shrines and their ritual functions are foregrounded.<sup>2</sup> *Sairei* on the other hand are festive events that attract audiences who engage with them as spectators. Shinto elements sometimes fade into the background during these dramatic spectacles. While *kami* still frequently play a part in the performance, their importance is often muted or even overlooked altogether. *Sairei* originated in Japanese cities, but since the spread of urban culture from around the fifteenth century they have become more widespread. INOUE Nobutaka (2013) points out that in contemporary Japan the growth of “secular festivals” or “festivals without *kami*,” which offer exciting experiences without obvious reference to divinities, function as a new form of *sairei*.<sup>3</sup>

Yanagida's distinction helps us understand forms of contemporary Japanese folk traditions and their ludic elements. While *matsuri* traditions are explicitly located as Shinto practices, many folk traditions that resemble *sairei* play down specifically "religious" elements in their performances. The performing arts are therefore often considered less serious or important than *matsuri*. Rather, as forms of *sairei* they are generally characterized as recreational or matters of cultural heritage.

Whether a particular art form is characterized as religious or otherwise is a complicated matter in the context of contemporary Japan. The idea of religion (*shūkyō*) as a distinct domain was introduced only in the modern era. The introduction of this classification left considerable ambiguity over exactly what was appropriately designated "religious" or otherwise.<sup>4</sup> Such ambiguities are apparent in contemporary surveys: whereas more than two thirds of Japanese respondents commonly state that they do not have a "religion," it is nevertheless common to say that people in Japan are born Shinto, marry in Christian ceremonies, and die Buddhist (SWANSON and CHILSON eds. 2005, 3). The gap here between statement and practice stems from the fraught ambiguities surrounding the category of "religion" in Japan (McLaughlin, this issue).

*Sairei*-related folk performing arts do not always foreground kami-related themes, nor are they always enacted in relation to Shinto shrines. But this should not be construed as simply meaning they are nonreligious. Whether spectators are aware of it or otherwise, Japanese folk performances draw on Shinto mythology and motifs. Moreover, these performances serve purposes that are often described as religious, such as mourning the dead and connecting with spirits (*kami*) in the afterlife. Such religious elements are often foregrounded during times of crisis, with funeral rites and *kami* assuming prominent roles in ritual performances.

Regardless of their exact "religious" status, I characterize *sairei*-related folk performing arts as rituals that carry out particular social functions. My goal in doing so is to move beyond debates about religious characterization to examine what dramatic performances do in post-disaster contexts. I argue that ritual-focused folk performing arts carry out decisive roles in rural Japanese communal life. Following DURKHEIM (2008), I suggest that among the most important is that they draw communities together and cultivate communal solidarity. They also provide space for processing transitions and change by furnishing connections with the past and the future and by enabling public articulations of loss and trauma. Folk performing arts therefore play key roles in the sociality of rural Japanese communities.

Folk performing arts in Japan can furthermore be categorized according to their form and the function they serve. Kagura and *ennen* (long life) are generally performed for people's health and longevity. *Dengaku* (music of the rice fields) and *ta-asobi* (playing in the rice fields) ask Shinto deities for prosperity and a good harvest. *Furyū* (ornamental) dances, closely associated with notions of elegance, make use of highly decorated floats and costumes and involve flamboyant performances. They are used to ward off evil spirits believed to cause diseases and disasters. A wide range of performance types come under this label, including *ken-bai* (sword dance), *shishiodori* (lion dance and deer dance), *toramai* (tiger dance),

and *nanatsuodori* (seven dances), which are particularly popular in and around Iwate Prefecture. *Bon* dance, a tradition of dancing during the festival for the spirits of the deceased that is observed across Japan, is also considered a type of *furyū* (KADOYA 1997; LANCASHIRE 2011).<sup>5</sup>

Rituals can be helpfully conceptualized with the concept of “religious capital” understood as a status gained by virtue of familiarity with a religion’s doctrines, rituals, traditions, and adherents. This status is deployable for a range of ends, including enhancing the satisfaction one receives from participation in a ritual and so increasing the likelihood and probability of further ritual participation (IANNACONE 1990). INOUE (2013) has applied this concept to religions in Japan, though he limits his scope to urban phenomena such as new sects and secular festivals.<sup>6</sup> This notion of religious capital serves as a useful framework for understanding the social roles of folk traditions. In the wake of disaster, local residents’ capacity to draw on their familiarity with rituals and traditions—a reserve of religious capital—enhances their ability to inspire one another to foster solidarity, to strive to overcome devastation, and to appeal to donors outside the community who are attracted by the possibility of supporting the renewal of folk traditions that bear transcendent significance.

I am particularly interested in the ludic elements of ritual. The concept of ritual play was prominently highlighted in Johan HUIZINGA’s classic *Homo Ludens* (1949). Huizinga argued that play is a voluntary activity that is free of “ordinary” constraints. Play takes us out of “real life” by creating a temporary sphere of activity with its own limits of time and place. Play therefore disrupts mundane existence and, within defined boundaries, enables different kinds of interactions to what might normally take place. Huizinga stressed that this space has its own distinct disposition. But it is important to note that while exceptional, play and the mundane are nevertheless connected. What takes place in playful spaces can reshape those that take place elsewhere. Playful rituals are centripetal, bringing people together via a singular event that creates a society. Playful rituals both inscribe boundaries and open us to the limitless. Ritual includes—even requires—a playful element that brings a sense of synesthetic fun.<sup>7</sup>

#### RITUAL ENTERTAINMENT IN IWATE

There are nearly one thousand performing arts groups active in Iwate Prefecture alone, with around three hundred groups located in the coastal area (KADOYA 1997). Iwate Prefecture traditions of folk performing arts are transmitted through the generations and are primarily maintained within small, rural communities. They are closely linked to primary industries such as agriculture and fishing. Some groups claim to have been active for more than one thousand years, while dozens of other groups have emerged during the past few decades and have revived or modified traditions to meet contemporary needs. Several *toramai* troupes in Ōtsuchi Town, for example, were formed only during the past few decades. The accompanying drum teams are also a relatively recent innovation, borrowed from



FIGURE 1. Shiroyama Toramai from Ōtsuchi Town. All photos by author.

practices used in larger festivals. In recent years Iwate folk performing arts have earned international renown. Hayachine kagura, for example, which is maintained by several groups in inland mountain communities of Iwate, was designated a UNESCO Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2009.

#### KADONAKA-GUMI TORAMAI

The troupes in coastal Iwate maintain a combination of distinctive performance traditions that blend folk entertainment, reverence for the kami, and Buddhist beliefs. The *toramai* is the iconic dance in the southern coastal areas in Iwate. A tiger is performed by two men usually in a single colorful yellow-and-black striped costume, and frequently more than one “tiger” shares the stage. One performer takes up the position at the front and holds a heavy wooden tiger head. The other performer occupies the tail. The dance involves dramatic coordinated movements between the two performers accompanied by musicians who play flutes and drums. As the dance is extremely vigorous and because the tiger head is very heavy, performers are generally replaced every few minutes. *Toramai* performers tend to be drawn from a younger demographic. The prevailing explanation for the meaning of *toramai* in Iwate is that of wishing for the safety of those engaged in fishing, by bestowing protection from a powerful tiger who travels one thousand *ri* (one *ri* is about 3.9 kilometers) each night—a journey which parallels that undertaken by fishing vessels. The dance is performed at annual local Shinto shrine festivals, launching ceremonies for fishing boats, weddings, and other festive



FIGURE 2. Kadonaka-gumi Toramai.

occasions. Some *toramai* troupes are maintained only within specific neighborhoods, but many others have expanded geographically as a result of urbanization.

Folk performing arts groups in the town of Massaki have been founded and maintained by neighborhood associations. Their history dates back to the twelfth century. According to legend, one day a ship loaded with ritual instruments and Buddhist statues suddenly arrived. The people built a shrine in order to dedicate these treasures to the deities. Among the treasures, there was a *shishigashira* (lion head). The villagers used this lion head for dancing, though they called it a tiger dance instead.<sup>8</sup> Massaki Town has eighteen districts and is divided into two areas, both of which face a bay and have their own shrine. Although the two shrines share the same name, Kumano, their seasonal festivals are carried out separately. I focus here on the southeastern half of the town. Every district in Massaki has its own *toramai* dedicated to the Kumano Shrine. These troupes operate alongside, and sometimes converge with, several other groups that perform other dance genres, including particularly *shichifukujin* (seven happy deities) and *teodori* (hand dance) groups. The leadership of neighborhood associations and folk performing arts groups sometimes overlaps. Kadonaka-gumi Toramai, one of the central groups that I focus on in this study, is drawn from two neighborhood associations in Massaki, Kadonohama and Nakai. Most members of this group are employed in the fishing industry and/or earn their income from farming soft seaweed. Kadonaka-gumi is widely known for its distinctive performance. This is because their leader in the Meiji Era (1868–1912) modified the dances and made them more attractive. Among their five acts, *kubi-nori* (“riding on the neck”) is very distinctive and the most acrobatic. This act involves the tiger standing up on its hind legs, a position

that requires the performer playing the tiger's head to sit on the shoulders of the performer playing the tiger's tail. The dance depicts a fierce tiger aiming at its prey. Besides the New Year and festive occasions in their communities, Kadonaka-gumi go out of town to perform a few times a year when soft seaweed is out of season.

#### UNOTORI KAGURA

Unotori Kagura is based at the Unotori Shrine in Fudai Village in northern coastal Iwate. Along with another troupe, Kuromori Kagura,<sup>9</sup> based in Miyako City, Unotori Kagura was recognized as an example of the “intangible cultural heritage that should be recorded” by the Japanese Agency of Cultural Affairs in 1996. Kuromori Kagura was also designated a “National Masterpiece of Intangible Cultural Heritage” in 2006. However, despite its importance, Unotori Kagura has received comparatively less attention. Iwate Prefecture only recognized its status as a form of “intangible cultural heritage” in 2011, just before the earthquake.<sup>10</sup>

Kagura is a quintessential Japanese folk performing art that is central to Shinto worship. *Kagura* 神楽 literally means deities (神) playing and having fun (*raku* 楽). They are renowned for their “celebratory and joyous humour” (BRANDON 1993, 143). In a kagura, performers invite kami to be present while a community entertains them and, through that entertainment, the community seeks to be favored with long life and good fortune (THORNBURY 1997, 14). Kagura can therefore be regarded as the archetypal ludic ritual. They disrupt mundane routines with performances designed to entertain, amuse, and instigate laughter.

Both Unotori and Kuromori are traveling kagura troupes. Over the course of a year each troupe carries out a tour across Iwate Prefecture between Kuji in northern Iwate to Kamaishi in the south.<sup>11</sup> The two troupes have traditionally followed alternate northern and southern routes during the winter, when no agricultural work is available that would otherwise occupy performers. At the beginning of the year, Unotori Kagura is invited to dance at shrines to invite kami to come out. Over the ensuing months these kami are carried within the lion's head as they tour communities throughout the coastal region.<sup>12</sup> As they undertake this journey the troupe offers prayers around each neighborhood during the day and at night they perform dances at a *kagurayado* (kagura residences).

The groups' approaches to touring have changed over time. In the past, performers would walk long distances between villages and be away from home for months. Nowadays they travel by car and spend a half-day to two days in one place over a weekend. While they still perform in traditional *kagurayado*, the groups also now perform in city halls and hotels. In 1955, Unotori Kagura performers stayed at thirty-three residences as they followed the southern route and in the following year they stayed in seventeen residences as they followed the northern route. The owners of these residences were local leaders of fishermen's associations; hosting the visiting kagura troupe served as a means of confirming the power and responsibility of these leaders. As the population has decreased and aged and as company employees have come to outnumber independent fishermen, it has become



more difficult to find wealthy local residents to finance *kagurayado* (MIYAKO-SHI KYŌIKU IINKAI 1999). Nevertheless, about twenty *kagurayado* were maintained until the tsunami in 2011.

Most current members of Unotori Kagura originate from the nearby village of Tanohata, and some also belong to the local Ōmiya Kagura. The troupe consists of around ten members whose ages range from 18 to 88. The oldest member, Mikami Iwatomi, is the head (*tayu*) of the troupe and is responsible for training the younger generation.<sup>13</sup> None of the members of working age are employed in agriculture or fishing, but instead find employment in various companies or as government employees.

Although each kagura group is usually associated with a particular shrine, all still reflect a mixture of local deity worship, Shinto myth, and also Buddhism. Kagura chants frequently include Buddhist sutras with the *kenbai* sword dance, for instance, including chants of “*namu Amida Butsu*” (all praise the Buddha Amitābha), a core practice of the popular Pure Land tradition. Some kagura troupes, including Unotori Kagura, maintain rituals that originated among mountain ascetics (*shugenja* or *yamabushi*). These ascetic orders practiced a mixture of esoteric Buddhism and indigenous mysticism known as Shugendō. Ritual specialists of this tradition historically communicated with wider society by practicing rituals and providing entertainment, including prayers, telling fortunes, and performing kagura dances (INOUE 2013, 897). The mountain where the Unotori shrine is located is widely recognized as being closely associated with *shugenja*. According to local tradition, the temple was established on Unotori Mountain in the eighth century. Subsequently, the Unotori Shrine became well known and attracted devotees from across the region (HASHIMOTO 2012).

*Shishi-kagura*, or lion dance kagura groups, are widely distributed throughout Iwate and the surrounding areas. They place special importance on a *shishigashira* (lion’s head mask), referred to as the *gongen-sama*, or “honored avatar,” indicating that the wooden lion head employed in the festive performance is itself the manifestation of deities that represent a Buddha.<sup>14</sup> It is believed that kami reside in the *gongen-sama* head and expel evil and bring happiness through the ritual performance of the *shishi-kagura*. Both Unotori Kagura and Kuromori Kagura make use of lion masks in their performances.

Unotori Kagura has about fifty performance acts in its repertoire, ranging from highly sophisticated dances to comic dramas called *kyōgen*. The group’s core dances are based on Shinto myths that feature popular deities. One of their most popular dances is the Iwatobiraki, a performance based on the myth of the “rock-door cave” recorded in the *Kojiki* of 712, in which the sun goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami is lured out of darkness by the sensual dancing of her fellow female deity Amenouzume (DE BARY 2002, 25).

Other female deities revered in the region make appearances in Unotori Kagura performances: Yama-no-kami (considered a female spirit in this region of Japan) is a mountain deity who comes down to the paddy fields in the spring to protect agriculture. Some people in forested areas still avoid entering the mountains on



FIGURE 3. *Gongen-sama* of Unotori Kagura.



FIGURE 4. *Koyama-no-kami*.

certain dates, being mindful of the taboo of the deity. Worship of Yama-no-kami is also common among fishermen who look to the mountains in order to navigate while out at sea. Accordingly, rituals that venerate the mountain deities are practiced by fishermen at sea (KAWASHIMA 2003, 71–74).<sup>15</sup> The dance of Yama-no-kami, which features a fierce mask, captivates the audience with tense and powerful movements. Several comedy dramas performed by Unotori Kagura also feature the buffoon character Koyama-no-kami (“deity of a small mountain”) who is portrayed as an idiot counterpart to the fierce Yama-no-kami. In this skit, Koyama-no-kami tells his hilarious story, with frequent use of ad-libs and indecent jokes.

Another popular deity is Ebisu, who is known as the deity of commerce in Kansai (in western Japan) but was originally a fishing deity. Ebisu is one of seven happy deities (*shichifukujin*) discussed later. On the Sanriku coast around Iwate, whales, whale sharks, and killer whales were also called *ebisu* because these sea animals are thought to bring good fortune (*yosemono*).<sup>16</sup> The *ebisu* dance is thus particularly important among communities of fishermen. It is also very funny, and for this reason is a crowd favorite. The performance of Ebisu hooking a fish is thoroughly comic, with audience members invited to come and join the deity in his fishing adventures. Both Yama-no-kami and Ebisu are well known nationally, but their performance and interpretations have been localized.

In Iwate and the surrounding areas, these rituals are still practiced by people in agricultural, forestry, and fishing communities. For these communities kagura



FIGURE 5. Ebisu dance.

performances resonate with the landscape of the mountains and the sea that dominates their everyday lives. Each year kagura performances are warmly anticipated for the way they interweave sacred and comedic elements.

FESTIVALS AFTER THE DISASTER:  
THE CASE OF KADONAKA-GUMI TORAMAI

The tsunami that followed the earthquake on 11 March 2011 resulted in widespread destruction along coastal Iwate. The area is famous for its rugged shoreline, which is dotted with hundreds of small communities, some of which were completely destroyed by the tsunami. There were almost 6000 casualties in Iwate, and the residences of about 88,000 people—nearly 30 percent of the region's total population—were destroyed or flooded. Most residents were evacuated to public facilities or to the homes of relatives. As for the performing arts, the tsunami seriously damaged many instruments, costumes, and the warehouses and working studios used by the groups. It also adversely impacted group members and their families along with their homes, jobs, and wider communities. Even some groups that were physically able to perform were reluctant to do so or refrained from practicing or performing during the first few months after the disaster. However, as people were moved to temporary housing and as the traditional Buddhist 100-day death memorial anniversary after the disaster approached, some groups started to perform again. The periodic summer and autumn festivals devoted to pacifying and mourning the spirits of the dead served as additional opportunities to resume these activities.

Kadonohama, one of two neighborhood associations that make up Kadonaka-gumi, lost about half its houses, and its residents were forced to move to an emergency shelter.<sup>17</sup> As community leaders, some members of the troupe were active in arranging for material support from outside the neighborhood and also helped facilitate temporary housing. In addition to securing aid from governmental emergency services, NGOs and other volunteers came to help. These volunteers helped clean up debris, manage emergency shelters, and provide encouragement and emotional support. None of the members of Kadonaka-gumi Toramai died in the disaster, but the troupe's warehouse was damaged by the tsunami, and some costumes stored at individual residences were swept away. Fortunately, while they were soaked with water, the troupe's most important and expensive artifacts, including rare lion heads and drums, were salvageable. One of the organization's leaders, Toshio Niinuma, applied for a grant from the Japan Foundation, which provided funds to repair the warehouse. Additionally, folk performing arts groups in Shizuoka Prefecture, located nearly 700 kilometers to the south, also supported Kadonaka-gumi. They donated money and invited Kadonaka-gumi and one other *toramai* from Massaki to the Shizuoka Folk Art Festival at the end of 2011. Both the Iwate and Shizuoka coastal areas are known for their strong traditions of folk art performance, and residents of Shizuoka are also aware of their own vulnerability to tsunami disasters. These factors encouraged strong feelings of solidarity. Evidence from my field research suggests that groups like Kadonaka-gumi, which

maintained strong collaborative relationships with performance groups in other regions, tended to revive comparatively quickly after the disaster. These external links facilitated easier access to donors who provided financial resources for repairing their instruments and performance costumes and also for facilitating access to new performance venues. In other words, those groups that had active relationships with outside actors could convert their connections into other types of social, human, and financial capital.

The Kadonaka-gumi Toramai performed for the first time after the disaster on 24 July 2011 in the gymnasium of a neighborhood elementary school that was used as an emergency shelter. This performance served to revive the *toramai* from its four-month hiatus and also marked the departure of residents from the school into temporary housing. After a few words from a leader of the troupe, about twenty members of the *toramai* came up to the stage and performed for about ten minutes. The crowd of nearly one hundred applauded. Several elderly women openly wept and told the group how much they appreciated the performance. At the end, the costumed performers threw red and white rice cakes into the audience, and the audience members competed to catch them. This celebratory gesture is common at shrine and temple festivals. The performance was made possible by donations from individuals and organizations outside the town, and the rice cakes were provided as a gesture of goodwill from outside Kadonaka.

When I first interviewed Niinuma, a leader of Kadonaka-gumi Toramai, in September 2011, he was already worried about the performance for the periodic shrine festival in October of the next year. As the festival is held only once every four years, canceling the festival threatened severe disruption to their cycle of rituals and traditions. Great effort was needed to organize the periodic shrine festival, but thanks to Niinuma's quick response and administrative skills, they were able to obtain aid more quickly than most other groups and the festival was held on 28 October 2012. Due to tsunami damage there were, however, some changes in the route for the parade and the venue for the performance. Some of the streets where the performers used to bless residents wove through neighborhoods that were now just empty spaces. Moreover, two districts that had sustained the worst damage were unable to take part in the performance. The associations in these severely damaged neighborhoods had disbanded and surviving members were integrated into other groups.

At the very beginning of the festival, a *mikoshi* (portable shrine) was used to bestow the blessings of the deities on neighbors. Men dressed in white garments associated with Shinto practices of purification carried the *mikoshi* on their shoulders. One unique aspect of the festival was that the *mikoshi* was loaded onto a fishing boat and transported around the bay to pray for safety on the sea and for large catches of fish. Dozens of fishing boats anchored to greet the *mikoshi* on this journey by waving colorful flags. Each performance group consisted of one or two neighborhood associations parading a *dashi*, a colorfully decorated float which carries a portable shrine. All of the *dashi* gathered at an open space near the bay where hundreds of spectators, mostly residents of Massaki, gathered. Older residents, some of them in wheelchairs, were in the front row. The festival reached a climax

with a presentation of dances by each district. Each group came up and performed its own versions of the *toramai* and *shichifukujin* (seven happy deities) dances.<sup>18</sup> The *toramai* was performed by male adults along with children, and *shichifukujin* was performed by children. Children who acted as the *shichifukujin* wore ornate costumes. They came up one by one and put on dances to the music of songs sung by an older man. The funny movements of the children dancing the parts of the *shichifukujin* received a particularly positive reception, with much laughter from the audience. The stirring *toramai* dance was also greeted with warm applause.

Once all of the performances in the open space had finished, the *mikoshi* was returned to the shrine and each neighborhood group separately entered the shrine precincts. At this point a final dance was performed in front of the shrine. There was virtually no audience for this performance except members of neighborhood communities themselves. The performers repeated the same dance routines, but in a much more relaxed and playful way. The tigers of the *toramai* seemed to be more excited, energized by the children performers of the *shichifukujin* who joined the *toramai* troupe at the same time. Improvising, several adults entered the *shichifukujin* and danced together with their children. These dances in front of the shrine involved greater intimacy in the absence of self-consciously performing for a human audience. This environment also amplified the function of the festival in re-identifying the community's bonds with its religious patron and reinforcing the bonds between the performers passing the *toramai* and *shichifukujin* traditions on to the younger generation.



FIGURE 6. The Kumano Shrine Festival, Massaki, Ōfunato City, 28 October 2012.



FIGURE 7. Dancing in front of the shrine: The Kumano Shrine Festival.

#### INNOVATIVE RITUALS: THE CASE OF UNOTORI KAGURA

Physical damage resulting from the disaster in the towns of Fudai and Tanohata, where members of Unotori Kagura live and the Unotori Shrine is located, was relatively minor. However, the *kagurayado*, the residences at which members of the group stayed and performed, fared poorly, as most of these were located near the shore. All of the twenty-odd *kagurayado* outside Fudai Village were severely damaged and in some cases were entirely swept away, leaving no space for gatherings and performances. The loss of *kagurayado* could have been a fatal blow to Unotori Kagura as the troupe lost both a venue to conduct performances and the income it had derived from these to maintain its activities. However, a number of factors mitigated this loss. First, their annual tour became more highly valued by those communities that invited kagura members to perform during their annual *jūngyō* (pilgrimage circuit). Second, there have been concerted efforts to revive the group, which required the troupe members to come up with innovative solutions to overcome the loss of their traditional resources.

On 18 July 2011, four months after the disaster, Unotori Kagura performed again. This was made possible through the vision of Nanako Sasayama, who operates a *kagurayado* at her home in Shirahama, Kamaishi City. Sasayama invited Unotori Kagura to entertain her neighbors at an evacuation center. The performance proved to be an inspiring experience that helped reunite this shattered community (MIICHI ed. 2013). Recognizing the cultural importance and symbolic



FIGURES 8 (above) and 9 (below). The Kumano Shrine Festival.







FIGURE 10. *Maitachi* ritual by Unotori Kagura at Unotori Shrine on 7 January 2012.

potency of the folk performing arts, the Sasayama family has since enthusiastically supported Unotori Kagura in their efforts to continue performing.

Their most important accomplishment was continuing their customary pilgrimage circuit through the coastal communities. Unotori Kagura performed *maitachi*, the dance which initiates the annual tour to coastal towns, on 7 January 2012. This ritual was performed at Unotori Shrine without an audience. The next day, the troupe performed at Fudai Town Hall. Children in Fudai Elementary School who were learning to dance also attended the performance. Parents and grandparents of the children added to the audience of residents who enjoyed watching the event. For this occasion, Unotori Kagura invited Shinogi Kagura of inland Takizawa Village in order to show their appreciation for assistance given after the tsunami and to enhance the relationship between inland and coastal groups. Communication between folk performing art groups had previously been rare, but in response to the disaster a member of Shinogi Kagura made dozens of connections for coastal kagura groups.<sup>19</sup> Such opportunities to gather different kinds of folk performing arts together increased significantly after the disaster. The devastation thus facilitated the creation of new relationships.

Two-thirds of the approximately 120 residences in the Shirahama district of Kamaishi city and two other *kagurayado* were lost. The only remaining *kagurayado* in Shirahama was operated by the enthusiastic Sasayama family, including Nanako and her husband Masayuki. Masayuki Sasayama was a powerful advocate for continuing the Unotori Kagura's ritual tour. He was convinced that the community needed a space to gather former residents. He even persuaded troupe members



FIGURE II. Performance by Unotori Kagura of the play *Iwanaga-hime* at Akka on 17 February 2013.

who were initially reluctant to resume their tour to take part in the revived ritual. He was, however, also irritated that the neighborhood association did not provide any help. Thus, unlike the aforementioned case of Kadonaka-gumi, the hosts of rituals and leadership of neighborhood associations did not overlap here.

On January 28 and 29, 2012, Unotori Kagura visited the house of Eiji Sasaki, Nanako Sasayama's father, who represented a *kagurayado* in the Shirahama district.<sup>20</sup> At the start of this performance event the troupe visited a local shrine with *gongen-sama* lion heads. Usually the troupe takes the lion head around the neighborhood and, to bestow blessings on individual households and to alleviate pain, the lion is made to bite people's bodies. For this occasion the troupe first visited a tsunami-destroyed former *kagurayado*. They put down lion heads at the entrance of the empty house and chanted a Buddhist sutra mourning the deaths of residents of the town. They then proceeded to the venue, Sasaki's house, wearing their costumes. Their performance on this occasion included a sword dance to expel demons. They then painted a *shittogi*, a white mark made of rice powder and water, on residents' foreheads, a ritual act that facilitated light-hearted and amusing interactions between performers and local residents.<sup>21</sup> The neighborhood Shirahama Toramai group also attended to celebrate the event, responding to Sasayama's informal invitation. Here, again, another unusual collaboration between troupes began.

The five-hour presentation by Unotori Kagura comprised around ten separate acts. Dances included a vigorous *kiyoharai* (purification) by Susanoo-no-mikoto, the deity of thunder and brother of the sun goddess Amaterasu; a graceful *matsu-*

*mukai* (two brothers celebrating the New Year); and the aforementioned powerful Yama-no-kami (mountain deity). Two *kyōgen* comedies were inserted in between these performances. The combination of serious and playful acts ensured the rapt attention of the audience. For one of the comedies, Mikami Iwatomi, the head of the troupe, played Tanaka no Jizō. With clown-like white makeup, the main character in this play concealed himself in the guise of various professions in order to cheat people out of money. At the end of the act, he pretended to be Jizō Bosatsu (Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva), a beloved protector who is commonly revered as a savior figure in Japanese religious tradition. The other comedy was *Akinai Ebisu* (Ebisu business). In this act, Ebisu catches fish and auctions them off. At the end of the performance the actor playing Ebisu throws snacks and candy to the audience. Adding to the humorous conversation among actors, ad-libs and engaging interaction with the audience elicited bursts of laughter, especially from the older women in attendance. The element of play that was deployed so effectively in both of these comedies created an intimate atmosphere and a sense of unity together with a ritual act of distributing food and fortune to the community. Behind the scenes, middle-aged women helped prepare food for the kagura members and snacks and drinks for the audience. Their bustle further added to the sense of ludic festivity. Conversations between the women behind the scenes were punctuated by lots of laughter and some tears, whether they talked about the disaster or not (reported by Nanako Sasayama in MIICHI ed. 2013, 101).

In February 2013, the Sasayama family collaborated with Professor Hiroyuki Hashimoto to create an event called Nanako's Festival, named for Nanako Sasayama. Hashimoto, a folklorist who worked at Morioka University, Iwate, until March 2012, had served as a member of the Iwate Prefecture Council for Preserving Cultural Property and was a key intermediary between donors and many performing arts groups in Iwate after the disaster. During the course of his work with performance arts groups, he became close to the Sasayama family, and from this friendship emerged the idea of the Festival. For the inaugural festival, five groups were invited to perform at the Sasayamas' *kagurayado*. The second and third festivals were held in July and December later that same year in hotels in different coastal cities in Iwate Prefecture. The organizers are planning for the festivals to continue. Local residents are invited to attend these events for free, though donations are accepted. Connections have also been made with a travel agency in Tokyo in order to try to attract tourists. Considerable effort has been invested to maintain an intimate atmosphere like that created during the usual ritual tours. As they had done for past ritual tours, the Sasayamas prepared hundreds of rice cakes to give to the audience. The overall purpose of these festivals is to seek the future sustainability of local folk performing arts traditions.

The disaster and its aftermath have changed the relationship between the troupes and *kagurayado*. In the past, troupe members were just visitors once every two years, and they rarely contacted each other during the long intervening periods. Since the Sasayamas became actively involved in troupe activities they have fostered regular contact between event participants. Along with two other recruits,

the nineteen-year-old son of the Sasayama family also joined the troupe. The family atmosphere of the troupe is pronounced, and one prospective performer even told me that he considered Nanako and Masayuki Sasayama to be like his parents. He offered this interpretation of the positive developments that had taken place after the disaster:

I don't want to be considered as a strange person, so usually I don't talk this way. But I sometimes think that someone, like deities [*kami*], chose me to perform. It may not be proper to say this, because the earthquake was terrible, but I felt something like magical power brought about positive encounters.

(MIICHI ed. 2013)

### CONCLUSION

In the case of *kagura* and *toramai* performances, ritual play creates an intimate space for communal interaction. These folk performances draw communities together as part of Shinto rituals. Playful elements are integrated within the intrinsic elements of each dance, in the throwing of rice cakes to the audience, and the enjoyable informal interactions between performers and the audience. The rituals are not specifically designed to provide a clear interpretative meaning of life and death in times of disaster. They do, however, remove the audience from daily life by creating an extraordinary space. At the same time ritual performers and their audiences are participating in long-established religious traditions for mourning the dead and expelling evil spirits. Folk performing arts thus provide opportunities to connect to the past on multiple levels—connections that are essential to the coastal Iwate communities struggling to construct a future in the aftermath of disaster. The resilience of folk performing arts is due to the fact that they continue to provide key functions in many Japanese communities. This is especially apparent in the wake of the disaster. These communal, ludic spaces might not seem to resemble contemporary disaster relief practices, but they are nonetheless crucial for the recovery of rural communities throughout the Sanriku coastal region following the Great East Japan earthquake. Rather than focusing on questions of “religion” or “non-religion” that gain little purchase in the Japanese context, the argument I have presented in this article is that a focus on ritual performance offers valuable lines of inquiry for future research in understanding the broader range of ways that elements of religious traditions figure into the relief and recovery of individuals and communities in post-disaster contexts.

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### NOTES

1. For early observations on the disaster relief operations see MATANLE (2011). See also McLaughlin's article in this issue for further details on casualties and material damage.

2. Other scholars, however, have highlighted the fact that *matsuri* also have a long and deep association with “entertainment.” As Joseph KITAGAWA (1987, 122) has explained:

The term *matsuri* refers to a wide variety of religious ceremonies as well as festivities con-

nected with religious ceremonies. (With the honorific added, *o-matsuri* means any kind of festive celebration, religious or otherwise.) Scholars agree that the original meaning of the term *matsuri* is contained in the form *matsurau*, which meant “to be with,” “to attend to the needs of,” “to entertain,” or “to serve,” in reference to kami, the soul of the deceased, or a person of higher status.

3. *Yosakoi matsuri*, founded in Kōchi and spread nationally, is a typical example; see INOUE (2013).

4. See Fountain and McLaughlin and McLaughlin in this issue.

5. See HUGHES (2008) who, although more focused on folk music than the dances themselves, nevertheless provides helpful explanatory details.

6. Inoue proposes a distinction between “religious maker” and “religious user” and pays attention to the daily consumption of religious commodities. Both sides of this flow of religious capital make up the types of exchange that play out in the wake of disaster.

7. See DALIOT-BUL (2014) for a historical review of play in Japanese culture and an application of these theories to contemporary youth culture.

8. The reason for this curious mixture of lion and tiger is unknown, though in other parts of Japan the two dances are very similar. It is also worth noting that other narratives of the origins of *toramai* in the Tohoku region point to an affluent merchant in the Edo period (1603–1868) who created a similar dance taken from popular *Jōruri* theater in contemporary Tokyo.

9. For further background on Kuromori Kagura, see Takashi ABE (2012).

10. As discussed below, this “unfair” treatment inspired some people from outside Iwate Prefecture to offer assistance to Unotori Kagura after the earthquake.

11. Historical records show that Kuromori Kagura traveled the region with permission from a local warlord named Nanbu. No records are available showing that Unotori Kagura traveled around the region during the Edo period, and this practice may have begun in the Meiji period (1868–1912). The former territory of the Nambu government is nearly equal to the current Iwate Prefecture, but the northern and southern ends of the Nanbu-controlled province overlap with nearby prefectures.

12. They carry kami out of the shrine in the lion’s head in order to bless people living away from the shrine. This issue will be taken up in greater detail later in this article.

13. I do not use pseudonyms in this article as all of the personal names I mention have appeared previously in mass media publications.

14. *Gongen* originally meant belief in the incarnation of a Buddha for the sake of bringing salvation to all sentient beings. In the *bonji suijaku* (本地垂迹, original ground and trace manifestation) theory, the deities of Japan are likewise manifestations of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, or they are one and the same, and so there were deities who took on the names of avatars (YONEI 2006).

15. According to Yanagida Kunio’s classic works, Yama-no-kami was a form of ancestor veneration. He argues that spirits of the dead reside in nearby mountains and come down to protect their descendants. This notion is criticized by some as rice farmer-centric. For those who lived off slash-and-burn farming and forestry, the mountain deities provided harvest and fortunes (SASAKI 2006).

16. Whale sharks and killer whales bring big fish such as tuna and bonito to the inshore waters, where whales occasionally beach themselves. Coastal residents divided up the whales with appreciation, thereby consuming the deity and its fortune-bestowing power (KAWASHIMA 2003, 3–11).

17. Descriptions of Kadonaka-gumi Toramai are based on interviews conducted on 6 September 2011; 27 May 2013; 1 February 2014; and personal observations of the Kumano Shrine’s festival on 28 October 2012. I also refer to a video recording of an event on 24 July 2011

by Abe Takeshi uploaded on YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIrpIarnDQ4> (accessed 24 February 2016).

18. In addition to these two dances, ordinarily the *teodori* (hand dance) would also be performed by children and women. (They do not involve instruments.) All of the *teodori* groups had to be canceled because of the extensive loss in the tsunami of kimono worn by the performers.

19. Takeshi Abe, a videographer who has visited and recorded various folk performing arts in Iwate for decades, bridged this relationship and organized many collaborative events involving groups from inland and coastal Iwate after the disaster.

20. The performance at Sasayama's *kagurayado* on 28 January 2012 was reported by Akiko Chiba with various pictorial images in CHIBA (2012). The performance at Sasaki's house was supported by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. It was also recorded by Takeshi Abe and uploaded to YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MuphrCpWays> (accessed 24 February 2016).

21. Intriguingly, the *shittogi* resembles the application of a *tilaka* on the forehead using sandalwood paste, a common practice in Hindu rites.

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