



## On the Ropes

As I sit writing this, I'm having a 'rest' day from my normal work. No carving or printing today ... I'm (slightly) under the weather and don't have a lot of energy at the moment. Part of this is due to the lingering effects of this spring's hay fever, but perhaps mostly it's because yesterday was Festival Day here, and I spent way too many hours on the team pulling our very large festival cart this way and that all over town!

I don't join this activity every time it comes around, but couldn't avoid it this time, as it was the turn of our particular neighbourhood area to organize it this year. I myself took no part in the organization meetings; the long-time residents here have everything pretty much worked out the way they want it, and there is nothing much that newcomers can add to the mix. They just need my body come the day itself!

I took my place on the ropes at just before eight in the morning, and after we hauled the cart up the hill to make obeisance to the local shrine god, we started off on the winding route around the neighbourhood. I'm sure you all know the system; there are many rest stops arranged at intervals along the route where plenty of food and drink is laid out for everybody, and the pace is very slow, so it certainly isn't back-breaking work, but by the time evening came around, I was very happy to get home and crash out on the tatami!

The high point of the day's activities came in the late afternoon. There are six of these large dashi carts in our area, and the climax of the festival comes as they all converge on one spot. This happened in the centre of one of the wide bridges across the Tama River, with teams from neighbourhoods on both banks coming together in a wild jumble of carts, ropes, and noise. Team leaders screamed at us to pull this way or that, while the musicians riding the carts kept up an insane din of drums and flutes, each group trying to out-do the others, or to throw their rhythms off-balance.

Just who 'won' I have not the slightest idea, nor I suspect, does anybody else!

I am told that traditional festivals like this are decreasing all across the country. I suppose to the younger TV and video generations, the idea of pulling an old cart around town is not so interesting. But this particular festival seems to be healthy; little kids ran around everywhere, and even that difficult generation - the teenagers - seemed to be well represented (especially in the crews who rode on the roof of the cart to help clear wires and obstacles!).

A couple of years back, I was requested to join that group of real hard-core enthusiasts who hoist and carry the portable 'mikoshi' shrines all over town, but I firmly declined that invitation. Perhaps I could have done it thirty years ago, but such incredibly hard work is completely out of the question for me these days. And somebody like me - who drinks very little - would be completely out of place on those teams, which become more red-faced and wild as every hour passes.

But do you know the real reason for my refusal? It's because I am just a little bit taller than many of those people, and I can imagine just how much of the weight would end up on my shoulders!

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