

Bon Dance in Kamuela

By Ma'ata Tukuafu

North Hawaii News - August 2006

It rained all day on Saturday August 19 in Waimea so everyone was pleasantly surprised to be participating at the Kamuela Hongwanji Mission's Bon Dance under the clear starry August skies that night. The wind was a blowing a bit cold but with the added cotton Bon Dance jackets, it seemed everyone was warm enough.

Minister of the Kamuela Hongwanji Mission, Itaru Nozaki gave a beautiful invocation at 7:30 p.m. to open the dance, and then immediately the piped-in music started playing. The eight blue-jacketed Taiko drummers pounded out the beat of the music on their drums and everyone found a place around the *yagura* and started dancing.

The structure set up in the center of the Hongwanji parking lot was covered in a red and white horizontal stripe. The *yagura* used to have men singing on a platform placed at the top, but this evening, noone was on there.

"We used to feed the men sake and then they would start singing," said Takako Ota, one of the women who was getting set to feed the masses after the dance. "They would sit at the top and sing for the dancers, but they all died now."

Joining her in the cultural hall were Wendy Oye and Patsy Kiyota, women who helped to prepare all sorts of food for the Bon Dancers. A rotation system is set up for food preparation and cooking at the annual Bon Dance and this time, the women said it was Sections 1, 2 and 3. Next year, it would be the charge of people living in Sections 4, 5 and 6.

"It's the same with the Cherry Blossom Festival," said Oye, who added that this system eased the workload for people every year.

A lot of people showed up for the festivities and enjoyed the dancing, the music, drumming and goodies that vendors had to offer.

The Kamuela Dharma school, which Thelma Ryusaki explained, was more like a Sunday school for their children to learn about the religion and culture, she said, nodding her head at the dancing. The booth offered delicacies like pickled peaches and boiled peanuts. "The kids had to measure one quart of peanuts for each bag, help package the pickled peaches [filled with pickling

juice in strong Ziplock bags,] chop onions and string the BBQ sticks,” Ryusaki said. Some of the children had helped with sales before joining in the dancing.

Community members of all races were there to enjoy the evening, the colored bulb-lights hanging over everyone’s smiling faces. Young and old, experienced or not, many people joined in, an awesome sight in Hawaii.

“What happens if you make a mistake in the dance?” I asked Hanae Okumura, a woman who had a red *palaka* [Hawaiian plaid favored by the Paniolo] and flowered Bon jacket on. She was part of the Kamuela Buddhist Women’s Association, and pointed out some of the others who had the blue *palaka* jackets on.

“Sometimes we sit out a dance if we don’t know it,” she said, adding that she was enjoying watching as much as participating.

More men than usual were watching their toddlers as their wives took part in the dancing. Chasing after their children, old-timers looked on, almost bewildered at the energy of the toddlers.

Before each song began, a recorded female voice would announce the next song, two times clearly, and then the drummers would start drumming to the song. Wearing blue jackets that said ‘Bon Odori Taiko,’ the drummers happily looked on as they kept a perfect beat, following the lead of the drummer placed in the middle of the line.

The Kamuela Hongwanji booth was selling ingenious lanterns made with recycled soda and beer cans, and each had a tag hanging from them with words like “success” or “good luck” hanging from them. Suspended from a bamboo stick, they could be seen all over the festival grounds, swung by children and adults alike.

Leilani of Waimea’s Leilani’s Bakery was purchasing a couple of the cute lanterns. “I’m going to be putting these on a gravesite, but cannot put “Good Health!” or “Welcome!” she said laughing as she searched for more appropriate wording for her relative’s grave. After asking how long it took to make one of the lanterns; cutting the can into even strips and squashing it into a lantern shape and stringing it on bamboo, someone said it took about 15 minutes. “Longer than it takes the men to drink it,” Leilani jokingly said about the beer cans.

The dancers, of all nationalities and races, were doing motions to songs that have been passed down from generation to generation. Impressive were the young teen-aged men who joined in and kept up with all of the motions and steps. Those who were less-experienced followed the

lead of those who knew the motions “by heart.” The Bon Odori dances have been performed for years and years, and are part of the Obon Festival, also known as the Festival of the Lanterns, or Feast of the Dead. Observed as a religious and cultural celebration, Obon honors those who have died. It is a time to express gratitude to the ancestors so that they may continue to rest in peace.

“This Bon Dance is big because it is the last one [annually, on the island,] said Moira, who is a postmistress in Kohala. “But I cannot dance, look at my legs,” she said pointing to her bandaged knee. An hour later, she was dancing jubilantly with the rest of the dancers before going home.

One of the by-standers, Kiyoshi, explained that the motions in the Bon Dance were a lot like hula motions. “Some show cherry blossoms, another show pulling rice,” he said.

Locals sat with their food in the cultural hall and ate and talked to one another. Sue Moss, eating with her mother said, “There’s so much change out in the world and this Bon Dance is held every year. It’s constant,” she said.

Minister Nozaki said several Hongwanjis were represented from around the island, including Honoka’a, Kohala, Hilo and Kailua-Kona. While he was talking, a little girl came up to him and asked where she could get a Bon towel, a piece of material that was used in some of the dances. He immediately took the one from his belt and handed it to her. With a surprised and very happy look, she took it from him and joined the dancers in the circle.

The Bon towels were being given out at a window outside of the Hongwanji by donation, but an impressive collection could be seen hanging in the cultural hall. One of the three ladies waiting to serve the masses food, said she remembered that they would get pieces of material from Hayashi store before they began printing the towels with dates and mission names. “We would get all kind colors and cut them with pinking shears,” said Takako Ota.

Wendy Oye said she had her own collection of Bon towels and was eventually going to make a quilt with them.

Ota and Oye were born and raised in Waimea, while Kiyota was born in Honoka’a. All three remember the Bon Festival as being a special time in their lives. They said there are about 80 women locally who participate in their Buddhist Women’s Association.

The dance would last until about 10:30 p.m., and then all dancers would be served wonderful food such as musubi, somen salad, kimpira, takuan and nishime [seaweed]. “Still, can’t go home yet, we have to clean up afterwards,” said Mrs. Watanabe of Kamuela Liquor.

When asked what would have happened if it had rained, the women said, “Oh, they would have danced in the rain anyway. We’re really blessed the weather is cooperating.”