Japanese Performers in 19th-20th century Norfolk

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Some of the first Japanese people to be born in Norwich were the descendants of Japanese performers who came to the city as part of acrobatic troupes. By following the lives of the individuals involved in these groups, we can explore what life was like for some of the earliest Japanese immigrants to come to the UK, and how their interactions and traditions changed and evolved over time. This mini-display will focus on some of the families and performers that came to Norwich and Norfolk, their experiences, and what life might have been like as they conducted their performances in the UK.

This display is part of an ongoing research project by Pernille Rudlin - Ninjin: Digital museum of Japan-UK (show) business.

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A Family Affair

Understanding the idea of family in the performing arts of the late 19th century

Performers demonstrate the butterfly act (浮かれの蝶) [left] and the barrel act. Image courtesy of Dr Robert H. Sayers.

Many of the families you will read about today were not all blood-related. Performers from Japan would frequently take on a common surname amongst their troupe, but may have come from different families, backgrounds or areas in Japan. Membership of the troupe and the craft of their act was then passed down through generations in these performing families as they travelled the UK and beyond.

Children in performing families were often from poorer backgrounds and joined the troupes in order to earn money and survive. There are also reports that some of the children who became involved in the performing families were abducted and sold to proprietors of the troupes. Children were sought after within acrobatics as they tended to be more supple and flexible to perform certain tricks, and were more likely to recover from trips or accidents – a common feature of a performer’s life given the complexity of the acts they were undertaking. Popular acts for children included contortion acts (kakubeijishi 角兵衛獅子), barrel acts, and the Risley act, where children balanced and flipped on the raised feet of an older, stronger performer. This was named after "Professor" Risley, an American performer who brought over the Imperial Troupe of Japanese to USA and Europe.
The Great Dragon Troupe first visited Britain in 1867 and first performed in Norfolk in March 1871 at Regent’s Hall in Great Yarmouth. The troupe was originally formed of 24-25 performers during their 1867 visit, and was likely led by Hotaka Chōjirō who performed the butterfly trick 浮かれる蝶 – a popular act in Japan from the 1820s that was a success with British audiences. The trick created the illusion of a paper butterfly delicately hovering over a paper fan. Butterflies are known as chō蝶 in Japan, which performers often incorporated into their stage names.

The troupe fell under several proprietors during their years of performing and merged with Tannaker’s troupes in 1871. While troupes were dynamic and fluid in terms of their membership and proprietorship, the concept of a performing family remained important to their lives, as seen in the postcard in this display. Members of a troupe would often adopt the same stage surname to consolidate themselves as a performing family unit, but still retained the memories of their lives and families back in Japan - at least five different Japanese family names can be identified in the photo here. The layers of identity that these performers embodied, from their names to their clothing, highlights the many dimensions of their lives at the time.

As generations passed, new families were borne of the troupes – sometimes between Japanese and British people. In August 1876, Kondo Yasokichi of the Great Dragon Troupe and his wife Emma Corbett, the daughter of a farm labourer, were married in Walsall. By 1882, their fourth daughter, Motto Laura Matilda Kitchie, is recorded as being born in Norwich and was baptised at St Martin at Palace Plain in February 1884. While the itinerant nature of performing troupes meant that the family did not settle permanently in Norwich, the growth of these families and many like it signalled a new era of cross-cultural relations facilitated by the increasing presence of Japanese performers in the UK.
Perhaps one of the most enigmatic proprietors of the Great Dragon Troupe was Tannaker Buhicrosan (タナカー・ブヒクロサン, possibly 田中武一郎 in Japanese). Tannaker’s identity is still a topic of debate, and the only known image of him is a drawing which perhaps intentionally fails to show his face. He was likely of Western descent, taking on the name Tannaker (possibly a Romanised adaptation of the common Japanese surname Tanaka 田中) as he became involved in the business of Japanese performance and merchandise. He was also known to wear a chonmage (a traditional Japanese topknot hairstyle) to give the impression that he was of Japanese descent and to add authenticity to his involvement in the increasingly lucrative Japanese acrobatic world.

The frequent mention of Tannaker in newspapers of the time show he was a prolific proprietor of many troupes of Japanese performers. Several of these troupes came to Norwich from 1869 onwards and performed in St Andrew’s Hall, New Victoria Hall, and on Unthank Road for the People’s Fete in 1873. At one 1878 performance at Victoria Hall in Norwich, audience members even received a variety of complimentary Japanese objects, including vases, antique ornaments, and writing desks.

Tannaker is perhaps most renowned for setting up the Japanese Village in Knightsbridge in 1885, set in the heart of Victorian London and featuring replica Japanese houses, a Buddhist temple, and populated by Japanese artisans and families. The village received much press attention and was visited by many people at the time following an increasing interest in Japan after the end of sakoku 鎖国, the policy of limited external contact in Japan by the Tokugawa shogunate which ended in 1853.

Tannaker was one of many proprietors that capitalised on the popularity of Japanese performance in the late 19th century. He came over to Britain in 1868 with a Japanese woman, Otake, whom he claimed he had married in Shinto and Christian ceremonies in Nagasaki. They married in Britain in 1879 and had 11 children together.
The Okabe family, active in Britain between 1900 and 1914, were originally formed of seven members, later becoming eight, who performed juggling, acrobatics, slack wire walking, and *kakubējishi* 角兵衛獅子, acrobatic performance by young boys that usually involved contortion. The poster here demonstrates some of the acts they performed, particularly ladder climbing (*Hashigonori* 梯子乗り) which features prominently on the poster and dates back to the 17th century. Possibly inspired by firefighting equipment in Edo (now Tokyo) at the time, the stunt involved dramatic movements at the top of a ladder and required great strength and balance. The tradition continues today where firefighters still perform ladder stunts at festivals across Japan, particularly on New Year’s Day.

Aside from the risk of injury from the elaborate tricks they performed, Japanese performers were also vulnerable to diseases and illnesses when travelling which could have fatal consequences. One of the original members of the Okabe troupe, Kiyoshi Hata, contracted meningitis and died in March 1903 aged 12. He was buried in Earlham Road cemetery where you can still see his grave today (right). The gravestone is typical of a British burial, but features on its bottom right an inscription of *Kanji* (characters used for writing in Japanese). The gravestone embodies how, even at these pivotal moments in their lives, there was a process of cultural exchange facilitated by the presence of Japanese performers in Norwich that saw the blending of traditions from both the UK and Japan.
Lukushima Troupe (active in Britain 1901 - 1918)

Japanese names for a British audience

'Lukushima' is not a word that would naturally occur in Japanese. Fukushima is a common Japanese surname, and it is possible that this was adapted to Rokushima and later to Lukushima to avoid deterring any potential English-speaking audiences with mispronunciations of 'Fuku'. The decision to use Lukushima as their performing name may also be a play on words as *fuku* 福 means luck in Japanese. This practice of Romanising Japanese names was common across troupes to ensure the widest possible appeal to their English-speaking audiences.

In 1904, the Lukushima Troupe are recorded as performing at the Hippodrome in Norwich. One of the most popular members of the troupe was included individually by name in this record - Otora Lukushima, pictured in this photo in Japanese costume. Otora san was known for their performance of sliding down an extended tightrope directly above the audience in impressive Japanese costume, made all the more astonishing that it was performed by a woman. If we closely observe the photograph, there are some hints that Otora san may not have been born female. The *katakana* writing at the bottom of this photograph reads “Tora Ichitarō Taka Rokushima”. Ichitarō is boys’ name in Japan, and it was commonplace for Japanese male performers to act as women during complex acrobatic stunts. Whatever the case, Otora san certainly captured the imagination of audiences with their mastery of tricks and flavour of Japanese culture through their grand costumes.
Many of the troupes of Japanese performers that came to the UK had remarkable longevity and continued to perform for many generations. The troupe which began as the Deguchi Troupe are first recorded as performing in 1900 in New York, and their descendants are recorded as performing across the world until 1980. In 1937, Masu and Yuri, two of the troupe who had been regularly performing hand balancing and juggling acts together since 1921, came to Norfolk and appeared at the Union Cinemas Regal in Great Yarmouth. Yuri 百合 means Lily in Japanese, and she performed using both names throughout her career. She married into the family in 1917 when her mother Margaret Blanchard married Jujiro Deguchi, who later become known as Masu and had led the troupe from the 1880s.

The pair continued to perform their juggling and balancing acts across the UK and beyond, yet after 1939 there is an absence of any description of them being Japanese and by 1942, they had dropped their Japanese names of Masu and Yuri altogether in favour of Lamonte and Julie. Tracing the changing names of these performers gives an important demonstration of some of the challenges that Japanese performers faced as immigrants to the UK. Many of these performers had spent most of their lives in the UK, but still retained elements of their Japanese identity as a means of distinguishing their performance and craft. The increasingly unfavourable climate for people of Japanese descent during World War II presented performers with a difficult choice, and many opted to hide their Japanese heritage.

The last surviving performers of this troupe were Johnny and Suma Lamonte, the son and daughter of Masu and Lily, pictured in this display, who performed across the world from around 1947 until 1980 when their agent, Don Ross, died.
References and related publications


This is ongoing research, and comments and information are always welcome. Please contact info@ninjin.co.uk for further information about the research.