An Approach to Aesthetic Criteria as Material for Folklore Studies: 
A Case Study of the Ōsato Tanabata-Odori in Ichikikushikino City, 
Kagoshima Prefecture

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During the 1930s, Kunio Yanagita started to use the word “tastes” to mean the sensitivity possessed 
by people in specific regions and times to judge good and bad or likes and dislikes, and proposed treating 
them as subject of study in regard to mental phenomena. Following this idea, Tokuji Chiba treated 
aesthetic criteria as material for folklore studies related to art and entertainment. Since then, however, 
other folklorists have not paid adequate attention to tastes or aesthetic criteria. This paper examines 
such tastes and aesthetic criteria through a study of an example of folk performing art.

This paper deals with the Tanabata-odori performed in the Ōsato district of Ichikikushikino City in 
Kagoshima Prefecture. The Tanabata-odori includes a competition for young male taiko (drum) dancers, 
who have been selected as representatives from each community involved, in the week-long practice 
called narashi. The results of competition are the focus of great interest among the local population, 
which has resulted in the creation of various expressions to describe a “good performance,” the 
accumulation of knowledge about various styles, the paying of close attention to technical details, and 
a consciousness of a dance legacy by which the features of their dance are passed down. By examining 
these factors, this paper considers how the people involved evaluate what a “good performance” is.

In the case of the Ōsato Tanabata-odori, the evaluation is characterized by its focus on how dancers 
have grown. People value not only the perceptual (visual or auditory) characteristics of dancing but also 
dancers’ ability to express their own personality through their performance. This may be substantially 
different from the common view of modern aesthetics, but in evaluating a dance performance that, as a 
folk art, takes place in an environment that conforms to people's lifestyles, it is quite natural to include 
in their entirety the various values that are inherent in the culture. In the case of the Ōsato Tanabata- 
odori, a strong historical influence can be seen to have shaped this set of values via the role of the local 
youth groups (nise/seimendan). These groups, with their roots in the life of the locality, have been the 
educators and cultivators of local young men in modern times, and have become the custodians of the 
dance performance.

Key words: tastes, aesthetic criteria, folklore studies and aesthetics, folk performing arts, Ōsato Tanabata-odori