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Peer reviewed

Introduction

Matsuri and Religion in Japan

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This book explores *matsuri* 祭 (festivals) within the broader context of religion. The original idea for the volume reflects a recognition that *matsuri* are intrinsic to religious, social, cultural, touristic and recreational life in Japan. Thus, a collection of scholarly essays juxtaposing distinct *matsuri* would not only reveal similarities and differences between them but also shed light on the depth and diversity of the meanings they articulate. As we set out to create the volume, then, our objective was to examine *matsuri* from different localities, showing their interconnectedness to religious life and ideas, as well as the different disciplinary methods through which they can be interpreted. Most importantly, we wanted to attend to the complexity of *matsuri* as multidimensional events imbedded in historical, local, national, and even global contexts.

The result is a set of chapters born from the intersection of ethnographic research and a variety of fields, including history, the study of religion, folkloristics, and anthropology. Embeddedness in locality is explored through festivals in both urban and rural environments as well as different geographical regions of Japan; in particular, we discuss *matsuri* in Kansai (Porcu; Breen; Yagi; Giolai), Tōhoku (Foster; Schnell; Foster and Ogano), Kantō (Tsukahara), and Niigata (Klien). Read individually, each chapter contributes to an understanding of a specific *matsuri* (or several *matsuri*) and demonstrates the role played by religion and belief in collective ritualized activities. Read as a whole, we hope the volume will serve as a multi-sited ethnographical, historical, and theoretical study, contributing to broader discourses on religion and festival/ritual/performance in Japan and elsewhere.

As the disparate essays in this volume came together, we were excited to discover a number of commonalities and emergent themes. These reflect in part

the nature of *matsuri* itself, but also perhaps a shared set of interests among contemporary scholars. The most striking theme is simply the notion of transformation and change: the idea that *matsuri* and religion as social and historical phenomena are neither static nor immutable. This interpretative concern with change is, of course, not new; the analyses in this volume confirm and build on perspectives already present in previous studies.¹ Both implicitly or explicitly, our chapters drill down into the very notion of change, unpacking the reasons behind it—political, ideological, aesthetic, or demographic. Along with the dynamics of transformation, the intrinsic adaptability of *matsuri* emerges in contrast and complement to the weight of tradition, whether real or perceived. Indeed, despite the value so often placed on continuity with the past, the history of any given *matsuri* is almost never characterized by linear progression or unified objectives, but rather by innovation, debate, creativity and flexibility. And as each of these chapters shows, every performance of *matsuri* today is only a snapshot of a moment in the present, imbued with meaning by living participants who look to the past even as they actively shape the future.

Another salient theme of our analyses is how *matsuri* play significant roles in the lives of individuals and communities and often serve as both markers and makers of identity. Some of our chapters focus on urban festivals, such as Gion Matsuri 祇園祭 in Kyoto (Porcu), Sannō Matsuri 山王祭 in Shiga (Breen), the winter rituals of Kyoto (Yagi), and Kasuga Wakamiya Onmatsuri 春日若宮おん祭 in Nara (Giolai); some on small-town or rural events, such as Sawara *no taisai* 佐原の大祭 in Chiba (Tsukahara), Akakura *kagura* 赤倉神楽 in Niigata (Klien), Namahage ナマハゲ in Akita (Foster) or Kuma Matsuri 熊祭 in the mountains of Akita and Yamagata (Schnell). In every case, the *matsuri* in question is deeply associated with the location where it takes place, often shaped by historical concerns and the religious and economic development of the region. In a sense, *matsuri* can be thought of as a feature of the landscape itself. This is clear with festivals such as Gion, Sannō, or the Sawara Grand Festival in which residents parade their local deities through the streets of the city or town. But it is true in a different way with rural festivals, such as Kuma Matsuri or Namahage, in which the natural environment—and mountains in particular—inform ritual performances and the narrative and religious structures undergirding them.

Regardless of locality, these *matsuri* reflect and create a sense of community identity for participants. The “community” can be very small: the members of a preservation society, residents of a district within a city, a few families in a rural

1 The list of influences and important previous scholarship is too long and varied to note here. For specific references, please refer to the individual chapters in the volume.

hamlet. Simultaneously, the same *matsuri* might also invoke a broader sense of identity—and concomitant feelings of pride, belonging, nostalgia—for residents of entire cities, prefectures, or even Japan as a nation. What comes across in all these chapters is an indelible but complex linkage between participation in *matsuri* and identity—how people define themselves (often in contrast to others). In many cases, especially on the intimate, small-scale level, this identity is more than just an intellectual or discursive construct—it is embodied, developed through physically relying on one another, dancing and singing, eating and drinking, sweating and crying, growing old together.

Indeed, related to identity, another theme emerges in many of the essays: *feeling*. By this we mean the *affective* and often *embodied* engagement with the experience of the *matsuri* that arises from musical and dance performance (and long hours of dedicated practice), physically strenuous activities such as shouldering heavy floats (e.g., *yatai* 屋台 or *dashi* 山車) or trudging through snow, and communal feasting, often late into the night. Such full-bodied immersion in *matsuri* is associated with emotional engagement on many levels, and articulated through diverse expressions of elation, nostalgia, longing, loss, mourning, exhaustion, discovery, joy, well-being, kinship and belonging.

Affect is also tied to the underlying theme of the volume—religion and spiritual engagement. In some cases, the religious associations of the *matsuri* in question are deeply embedded in Buddhist and Shintō institutional structures, and accordingly subject not only to ritual protocol but also to the vicissitudes of power and politics. Other *matsuri* follow traditional forms that may be less documented but are nevertheless formalized as procedures for interacting with the gods. And still other *matsuri* seem to be more about civic or community engagement (or tourism) and, for most participants, only have a vague relationship to “religion” per se. But whatever the case—and of course these positions are not mutually exclusive—we almost always find what we might call “religious feeling” or “spiritual affect,” a sense that the ritualized activities of the *matsuri* open up a mode of communication between humans and higher, sacred forces. While the examples documented in the pages that follow differ in their particulars, they are similar in that the act of *matsuri* creates a temporary space-time of heightened emotions, awareness and engagement that transcends the quotidian. In this sense, the experience of *matsuri* is part and parcel of the feeling of religion.

At the same time, most of the chapters collected here also reflect the way the sacred dimension of *matsuri* is inevitably embedded in a much more profane landscape. By tracing historical changes as well as contemporary manifestations, we see the role of politics—local, national, even global—in shaping

the development and performance of *matsuri*. Demographic and economic factors are always a concern, as community members grapple with questions as distinct but intertwined as depopulation and tourism. In some cases, the political dimension extends well beyond the region and even the nation; Gion, Sawara Grand Festival and Namahage, for example, have all been inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In the final analysis, one distinct aspect of *matsuri* is that they always have one foot in the transcendent realm of the "religious" and another in the mundane realm of the "political." Yet, such a binary is too simplistic: as the chapters that follow demonstrate, *matsuri* articulate the exquisite way in which the religious and the political are always symbiotic, intertwined, complementary, and often indistinguishable.

The volume opens with two chapters related to float festivals. Based on long-term participant observation, Tsukahara Shinji's "Displaying Mythological Characters: Changes in the Meanings of Decorations in the Sawara Grand Festival in Chiba, Japan" analyzes this particular *matsuri* in terms of its close relation to political issues. The figures on the floats represent mythological and historical characters closely associated with nationalism and imperialism. While neither denying the quality of these figures as aesthetic objects nor the work/intentions of their creators (most of whom were not from Sawara itself), the author's attention is directed to the meanings people ascribe to these figures and to the emotions and actions they inspire among local people in present-day Sawara. Moreover, the chapter explores the role float figures play within the political framework of modern Japan and Shintō nationalism, with an eye to the interplay of traditional culture and politics. Today the figures paraded through town are mostly appreciated for their aesthetic quality which, to some extent, has overwritten their nationalistic origins. Yet at the same time, Tsukahara highlights the danger of considering them as completely disconnected from these "past" ideological associations.

"Gion Matsuri in Kyoto: A Multilayered Religious Phenomenon" by Elisabetta Porcu explores this famous festival linked to Yasaka Shrine from a multidimensional perspective. Porcu analyzes the religious aspects of the festival in close connection with the various actors involved in its organization and running. These include the residents of neighborhoods sponsoring floats (*yamahoko-chō*), the local government, and Yasaka Shrine. The chapter focuses on the festival's most recent developments, particularly the reinstatement of the second float procession, or *ato matsuri* 後祭, in 2014. One critical consideration that emerges from this analysis is a constant negotiation and blurring of religious and secular boundaries, both in tangible geographical spaces (tem-

porary shrines, governmental buildings, etc.) as well as conceptual spaces such as the constitutional separation of religion and the state. The author further reflects on this festival in terms of “contested zones” where disjunctions as well as resistance to central decisions are in play. Gion Matsuri, Porcu suggests, can be understood as a microcosm or cross-section of society which mirrors clashing interests and problematic territories within Japan today; it thus reveals, more broadly, the complex interplay of religion with the public sphere.

The Kansai area remains the locus of the third chapter, “Sannō Matsuri: Fabricating Festivals in Modern Japan,” by John Breen. As the title suggests, the author’s starting point is that festivals reinvent themselves over time, while retaining a perceived continuity with their “mythical” past. The Sannō festival at the Hiyoshi Taisha 日吉大社 complex in Shiga Prefecture exemplifies this dynamic. Breen analyzes the festival through a combination of first-hand observations; secondary historical sources that trace its origins, premodern representations, and developments through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and primary sources through which we can see how the modern festival came into being in the mid-nineteenth century. As in the chapters on Gion Matsuri (Porcu), Namahage (Foster), and Kasuga Wakamiya Onmatsuri (Gioli), Breen takes into account the multivocality of the festival with its “multiple moving parts,” including its physical sites, the identities of the *kami* 神 worshipped, and its various religious actors—from those with political and institutional power to the “common people” who have played a fundamental role in keeping the festival vibrant.

The next chapter takes us to a rural setting in Akita Prefecture. Michael Dylan Foster’s “Eloquent Plasticity: Vernacular Religion, Change, and Namahage” explores this winter *matsuri* where, on New Year’s Eve, men costumed as demons visit households where they scare and discipline children, and bless the family for the coming year. The author’s analysis of Namahage shows how a festival/tradition can assume different forms to accommodate the changing needs of the communities involved and also sheds light on the dynamics of change itself. Namahage can be understood as: a) a ritual performed on New Year’s Eve within private households; b) a public performance in February oriented toward tourists (i.e., the Namahage Sedo 柴灯 Matsuri at Shinzan 真山 Shrine); c) and most recently, an example of “intangible cultural heritage” inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List. Foster analyzes these three layers with regard to their differing engagement with religious elements. The chapter concludes with the author’s interpretative model/metaphor of *hrönirism*, an attempt to conceptualize how these “different” versions of the same tradition can co-exist, mutually informing and constituting one another, and all equally “real.”

Winter is also the seasonal setting for the next three chapters. In the first, “Kuma Matsuri: Bear Hunters as Intermediaries between Humans and Nature,” Scott Schnell unpacks rituals related to traditional hunters (*matagi*) who venerate the *yama no kami* 山の神, a female deity residing in the mountain. In particular, Schnell focuses on the *kuma matsuri*, or bear hunting rituals where the bear is seen as a gift bestowed by the mountain deity herself and not merely a wild animal to be killed for the sake of sport or recreation. Through connection with the divinity, the *matagi* can also “absolve themselves of sin for killing animals.” The ritual articulates the *matagi*’s sense of interdependence with the mountain and veneration of the *yama no kami*; it also reflects “an ethic of conservation” of the resources and health of the mountain’s ecosystem. Moreover, similar to analyses in other chapters (e.g., Porcu; Foster) a continuous shifting of boundaries is at play here, with the *matagi* as intermediaries moving back and forth between the cultivated human world and the realm of the *yama no kami* and her mountain.

Yagi Tōru’s chapter, “Fire, Prayer, and Purification: Early Winter Events and Folk Beliefs in Kyoto,” takes us back to an urban setting with an exploration of rituals performed in late autumn and early winter. The author illustrates a series of festivals, including the fire festivals of *O-hitaki* お火焚き, *Ninamesai* 新嘗祭, and a variety of rituals related to purification and visiting deities associated with Buddhism, Shintō and folk traditions. Among these, rites such as *Kakure nenbutsu* かくれ念仏 (hidden *nenbutsu*) performed at the Rokuharamitsuji 六波羅蜜寺 temple are linked to political issues in premodern Japan and the suppression of certain practices as a way to destabilize powerful and consolidated religious institutions. Yagi demonstrates the long-standing persistence among the people of Kyoto of the idea of cleansing the old year’s impurities as they enter into the new year. The description of these rituals is framed within the concept of a cyclical life that needs to constantly regenerate itself as it passes between binary forces of pollution and purification, death and rebirth.

Andrea Giolai’s “Encounters with the Past: Fractals and Atmospheres at Kasuga Wakamiya Onmatsuri” explores Nara’s most important religious festival, Kasuga Wakamiya Onmatsuri, by countering the idea of an unchanged and historically linear tradition. The paper fills a gap in earlier studies of this festival, in which less attention was paid to its transformations over time. To convey the non-linearity of this *matsuri* and its history, Giolai links his analysis to the idea of “fractals” and “atmospheres.” Fractals evoke the complexity of the part-whole relationship, that is, of the phenomenological parts of the festival and the festival as a whole. The notion of “atmospheres” resonates with the author’s background in music studies and suggests that Onmatsuri’s longevity and pop-

ularity rest upon the generative and constructive effect of affective relations to its past. This hints at a continuum that reinforces a sense of participation in a coherent whole while, at the same time, distinguishing the festival's constitutive events and their developments. The multiplicity of the deities related to the *matsuri*, its material elements, as well as the experiences of the participants, all coalesce to form its multivocal parts.

In “Demographic Change in Contemporary Rural Japan and Its Impact on Ritual Practices” Susanne Klien turns her attention to rural areas in Niigata Prefecture and draws on Ono Akira's notion of “marginal hamlets” (*genkai shū-raku*), communities in which over half of the population is over 65. She illustrates how ritual practices in these areas have been affected by depopulation and demographic change and how participants struggle to perpetuate their traditions while also creatively coping with the problems made by such changes. Klien shows us that even while residents grapple with how to “preserve” their folk performing arts traditions, mobility and hybridization emerge as the result of constant adaptation to socioeconomic circumstances. The chapter focuses in particular on two preservation associations engaged in rituals revolving around *chinkon* 鎮魂, or the pacifying of spirits: the Buddhist *bon* 盆 dances of the Nakajō *Dai no saka* 中条大の坂; and the Shintō shamanic performing arts of Akakura *kagura* at Jūnisha Jinja 十二社神社. In both cases, participants view their traditions through a veil of nostalgia and think of them as firmly rooted in their geographical location, despite clear evidence of non-local origins.

Our volume ends in a somewhat experimental and unusual way for an academic publication. Given the prominence of ethnographic research in our work, we decided to conclude open-endedly with a photographic essay based on the work of a *matsuri* photographer, Ogano Minoru. In “Secret Eroticism and Lived Religion: The Art of Matsuri Photography” Foster introduces this professional photographer and translates Ogano's descriptions of his pictures related to *mushi-okuri* 虫送り in Aomori Prefecture. Ogano explains how his own objective in photographing *matsuri* is to capture the “affective and emotional” face of festivals as experienced by the participants—a sentiment consistent with the emphasis on “feelings” common to other chapters in this volume. Ogano also describes the religious elements in *matsuri* as emerging organically from the life and belief of the participants, a view that resonates with observations made throughout the book.

The chapters here represent a range of scholars located around the globe, at various different stages of their respective careers, and drawing on different theoretical and disciplinary backgrounds. Two of the chapters (Tsukahara; Yagi) were translated especially for this volume; we are honored to present,

for the first time in English, the work of these important scholars. Of course, any collection of essays on a subject as diverse and complex as *matsuri* cannot represent the field, and that is certainly not our intention here; rather, we simply want to emphasize its diversity and complexity. We hope these historical and ethnographic analyses will be helpful to anybody broadly interested in Japanese *matsuri*, religion, and folklore. Many of the chapters draw on and develop, either explicitly or implicitly, fresh methodologies and theoretical constructs—such as an “agency-of-artifacts approach” (Tsukahara), “contested zones” (Porcu), notions of historical contestation (Breen), *hrönirism* (Foster), “traditional ecological knowledge” (Schnell) and “fractals and atmospheres” (Giolai). Ideally, readers will engage with these ideas and push them further, applying them to different cases in Japan and, we hope, to other geographical and cultural contexts as well.

Finally, we want to acknowledge the strangeness of offering a collection of essays on *matsuri* in the midst of a global pandemic. As is clear from the chapters, and evident to anybody who has ever attended a festival in Japan, *matsuri* are characterized by people coming together and transgressing everyday norms of “social distancing,” to say nothing of the particular restrictions necessary during the current crisis. Indeed, *matsuri* are all about gathering in one place together, sharing with others, being part of something bigger than the self. They are crowded, communal experiences, in which people—often strangers—find themselves clustered together, their bodies jostling and in contact as they sing, dance, pray, eat, and drink, breathing the same air. Not surprisingly, many of the *matsuri* discussed in this volume were cancelled for 2020.

But as mentioned above, one theme shared by every essay here is *change*. Regardless of how much they may feel like—or portray themselves as—authentic and immutable traditions, *matsuri* are characterized as much by accommodation to the present as by adherence to the past. They survive through preservation and resilience, but also through flexibility, innovation, and creativity, always inevitably reflecting the needs, agency and invention of people living in the present. 2020 may be a year of devastating rupture and sadness throughout the world, and the *matsuri* (and communities) presented in this volume will certainly be affected by this experience. But if the past is any guide, in each location documented here (and so many more), people will reemerge from this moment of uncertainty and isolation to reshape their *matsuri*, to transform it so that it means something for them *now*, and provides some kind of hope for the future.

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