

Carmen Săpunaru Tămaş

**Ritual Practices and Daily Rituals
Glimpses into the World of Matsuri**

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Foreword

Made up of five distinct papers, this is not a unitary volume. With the exception of Chapter 2, all the other papers were previously published, the versions included here having been revised and (hopefully) improved. What they have in common is the focus on *matsuri* - Japanese festivals - and their role in contemporary Japanese society, as well as the connection with the local communities. The *matsuri* described in the first four chapters are mostly concerned with the indigenous set of beliefs currently known as Shinto; even in the cases where various ceremonies are performed at Buddhist temples, the influence of older beliefs is apparent. The last chapter is exclusively about a Buddhist set of practices, but it is connected to the others through the role the ascetic practices play in the community created around the temple, and the way daily, ordinary life is organized around extra-ordinary events and aspects that establish a relationship between our logical, reason and science-based life, and elements that are (or believed to be) beyond human grasp.

My love affair with *matsuri* began when I was writing my master's thesis, on Japanese myths; as happy as I was to live in the world of gods and goddesses, it was even better to discover that they were still present in our society, resurrected for a few days a year in the company of humans. A fortunate coincidence, the first *matsuri* I ever attended (without understanding much about it) was Tenjin Matsuri (discussed in Chapter 2), which has remained my favorite, a longing from afar, because I could not even dream of being able to do research at such a famous place. I have been traveling around Japan since 2005, attending various *matsuri*, many of which are described in the present volume. While by no means an exhaustive analysis, the chapters in this volume are an attempt first at preserving some data about ceremonies and events I consider extremely precious for the history of humankind, and second, at shedding some light on the role rituals play in life in the 21st century. Religion and personal faith aside, rituals are vital for our existences, just as the company of other humans is, and they provide (in a way similar to the need for monumental architecture) group cohesion and purpose. The Japanese *matsuri* are supported by communities, and in turn, they create communities.

As a European living in Japan, I am well aware of my limbo existence: I am no longer one hundred per cent Romanian, but I will never be Japanese either. I make mistakes in both cultures, and I am forgiven in both because the set of expectations a regular member of society must fulfill do not apply to outsiders. That can be an advantage

from the anthropologist's perspective, as it helps me be more objective, analyze the subject(s) of my research with more detachment, but at the same time, it can also create a feeling of loss. Nevertheless, whatever may have been lost by living in two countries has been more than compensated by the discoveries made during my journey: masked dancers weaving their way on the stage all through the night, wild boars sacrificed to the gods, their meat eaten almost raw by the side of the river, straw dragons slayed at midnight, men bathing in frozen rivers and standing on burning fires, going down steep slopes on tree trunks, or carrying extravagantly decorated parade floats for three days in a row, long-nosed demons who awaited to spank the participants with bamboo sticks, laughing gods and ritually weeping babies, huge torches that break the veil between worlds, and fireworks that appease the god of thunder. These past fifteen years have been so rich in experiences that this small volume can include only a small sample, but I hope my selection will offer a useful insight to those interested in this particular aspect of Japanese culture.

I must mention here that these extraordinary experiences and this book itself would not have been possible without the support of some equally extraordinary people, whom I would like to thank here in chronological order (the order they came into my life). Mrs. Gabriella Gheorghiu Baumet, my first English teacher and the person who taught me not only to dream of an academic career outside the borders of my native country, but also to love English and

being a teacher. Unfortunately, she is no longer with us, but I am still using her methods when I teach. Mr. Mircea Dinutz, my literature teacher, who taught me how to express my dreams in writing, and who believed in me from the moment we met. It is my greatest regret that I cannot offer this volume to either Mrs. Baumet or Mr. Dinutz. Ms. Lucreția Gurguță, my French teacher, who has been a wonderful presence during my high-school years and well after that. Prof. Tazuko Sawada, Masaru Tongu, and Takeshige Takehara from Nara University of Education, who represented my first encounter with Japanese academia, and who kindly guided me even after I graduated from their institution. Mr. Masakatsu Hatayama and Mrs. Michiko Hatayama, my Japanese family and the most generous people I have ever met. Prof. Shunsuke Okunishi, my academic advisor, my Professor, who first opened the doors to the world of *matsuri*, and to whom I owe much of my academic career. Prof. Hitoshi Kato, who has been one of my strongest and consistent supporters through the years. Mr. Shogo Kanayama and his family for their support during my research on Nichiren practices. Mrs. Kikuko Sano, a long-time friend and role model. Mr. Takashi Shinki, who introduced me to Saijo Matsuri and who has been driving me to various distant corners of Japan, in search of *matsuri* and sacred places. The Takahashi family from Saijo City, who welcomed me into their home and to their festival. Mrs. Norie Kikuyama, who provided me with an introduction to Osaka Tenmangu Shrine, and Mr. Yoshihiko Higashi, thanks to whom my research on Tenjin Matsuri started in earnest. Mr. Taneharu

Terai, high priest of Osaka Tenmangu Shrine. Mr. Yoshiki Miyamoto, head of the Ôtori Mikoshi Group, who has allowed me to follow him during various events for more than one year, who has given long and detailed answers to my questions, and who has provided the excellent English tea without which this volume could not have been completed. Mr. Takehiro Hirai and Mr. Hirotada Kojima, for taking the time to meet with me and answer my questions, and all the other wonderful gentlemen from Ôtori Mikoshi Group, for allowing me to become a temporary member of their community.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family. My parents, Maria and Constantin Săpunaru, doctors extraordinaires, to whom I owe all that I am, including my passion for mythology (which started with the *Iliad* being read to me when I was five years old), my spirit for adventure, and the belief that when there is a will, there is a way. My friends, Dr. Irina Holca, who has been by my side since we both started learning Japanese in 1997, and who understands best the joys and troubles of the career we chose, and Dr. Angela Drăgan, who has supported my academic initiatives from the other side of the ocean. Finally, my very patient husband, Adrian Tămaș, who did not get just a wife, but also a new home on a new continent in the bargain.

Carmen Săpunaru Tămaș

Working for the Gods: Feasting and Sacrifice at Saijo Matsuri

Foreword

Sunday, October 16, 2016. A sunny, already hot morning, despite all forecasts that had predicted rain for the day. It is the last day of the festival, and spirits run high as the exhausted float carriers hurry to remove the plastic covers that protected the intricate carvings of their beloved parade floats. Amaterasu, the sun goddess, known for her predilection towards hiding in caves when in a bad mood, must be pleased with this year's efforts. Most of the floats are already in place in front of the old palace site, and the carriers can finally sit and rest for a brief period, while their wives and daughters distribute steaming bowls of food: noodles, curry and rice, miso soup with rice and vegetables. The air has the flavor of home, and peace, and happiness. Onlookers stare at the floats, take photos, and line up to buy street food delicacies: small hotcakes smelling divinely of vanilla and milk, crisp fried chicken bits, fried octopus dumplings, and ice cream, lots of people line in front of

the ice cream stand because it is getting hotter. A Sunday that feels gloriously like a Sunday.

Until there is a commotion at the entrance towards the row of parade floats. Not many people pay attention: it is not uncommon for the float carriers to get into minor scuffles. Yet this time something different had happened: a young man in his early twenties slipped, his foot was caught in the huge wheel of a float, and, until the pullers managed to stop it, he had been dragged along for about ten meters. An almost unnoticeable incident in a flurry of golden tassels and embroidered lions, lacquered wheels and scattered confetti. Despite being there, few people were actually aware that a young man was about to lose his foot, his bones crushed by the half ton of the black and gold offering for the gods. Realization only hit the next day, when the news had spread, and the usually subdued atmosphere that followed the festival, when the parade floats are taken apart and put to rest in the warehouses, turned into something similar to a wake. Nobody had died, but a life was almost over. The gods must be satisfied.

Japanese festivals - working for the gods

Modeled after the famous Gion Matsuri, Saijo Matsuri boasts only 300 years of history, yet pride in the local festival is high, and those born in Saijo will return there from all corners of Japan in order to take part or simply enjoy three days of revelry in the company of the descending gods.

Centered around Isono Shrine (a place of worship dedicated to the goddess Amaterasu), Saijo Matsuri involves more than eighty exquisitely decorated parade floats that are almost continuously carried around the city for two days and two nights. The present paper focuses on the human sacrifice aspect apparent during the festivities, where the participants are somehow unique in their stubbornness about carrying the *danjiri* (which weigh several hundred kilograms each) for two days, with very few breaks for eating and sleeping. Exhaustion and physical pain become apparent after the first hours, and by the end of the second day some of them sleep walk; nevertheless, sadness, not relief, is the prevalent emotion the day after the festival, when the *danjiri* are taken apart and stored in special warehouses, to be taken out again the next year.

Before going any further with this analysis, one key concept must be made clear: that of *matsuri* - a Japanese festival. According to the Grand Dictionary of Japanese Folklore (*Nihon Minzoku Dajiten*), a *matsuri* represents the time when the divine spirits are welcome among mortals, “receiving offerings and being properly entertained with artistic performances and feasts, so that they would be pacified” (Fukuta & al. 2000: 577) According to the textbook recommended by the Association of Shinto Shrines (Jinja Honchô), *matsuri* are inextricably connected to Shinto shrines, and they can be divided into events related to specific moments in the life of an individual, and annual events, most of which are tied to agriculture and fertility rituals (*Nihon no*

Matsuri 2014). Within a special category (although similar in meaning and purpose to the annual events for common people) fall the *matsuri* that involve the Imperial House and which are celebrated at the same time all over the country, being called “national festivals” (*kokka matsuri*), but they are outside the scope of the present study.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss a specific Japanese festival, namely Saijo Matsuri, but in order to do that, we must first clarify what *matsuri* are and what is their role in contemporary Japanese society. Rumor has it that there is a *matsuri* somewhere in Japan on any given day of the year, and this might not be far from the truth. A simple internet search reveals a list of 150 *matsuri* centered around *dashi* or *danjiri*¹, however, the *danjiri matsuri* from Sakai City, Osaka Prefecture², involve twelve different events spread from September 30th to October 10th, events that are not listed within the 150 festivals mentioned above. Saijo Matsuri, the focus of this paper, appears on the above-mentioned list, but as a single event, when it actually includes four separate festivals, which take place from October 10th to October 17th. Shiiba Kagura³ or Takachiho Kagura, to give a different example, are usually seen as one event, but they are performed in over twenty different villages, 33 in the case of Shiiba Kagura, where the fact that they are all performed during the same night makes comprehensive research turn

¹ Parade floats.

² Fieldwork conducted between 2007~2012.

³ *Kagura* is a type of sacred dance performed as an offering to the gods.

into a Sisyphus-like endeavor. All these festivals and celebrations have a common purpose: welcoming the descent of the gods among the mortals, and entertaining them in order to gain their benevolence and avoid possible catastrophes (plagues, floods, earthquakes, and any other misfortune that might befall the helpless humans). Offerings must be made, and entertainment (the word used in the Grand Dictionary of Japanese Folklore is “hospitality” - the key word that gained Japan the title of the 2020 Olympics host) must be provided.

Herbert Plutschow states that “one can find in the *matsuri* universal features common to the traditional rites in general. [...] *matsuri* share with most rituals throughout the world universal concepts of cosmic order and the human place in it. Thus, although it is highly developed and stylized, having given birth to different forms of Japanese art, *matsuri* participates in universal patterns of human ritual.” (Plutschow 1996: 9) In other words, *matsuri*, the Japanese festivals, are a local manifestation of the ancestral fear of nature and belief that nature and/or the gods must be appeased through a certain kind of ritual.

In Japan, there are three major types of offerings (*shinsen*) for the gods, and they are usually made together. The first, and universally encountered in cultures across the world, is the offering of food, which can be ritually scattered (beans or rice cakes), raw (most common, includes salt, water, sake, rice, vegetables, fruit, fish, and sometimes wild game), or cooked (on special occasions). The second type is

represented by feasting with the gods: welcoming them in one's house and presenting them with the best food available, or eating together during a festival at a banquet where the gods are assumed to be present. The final type includes the offering of artistic entertainment: the sacred dances (*kagura*) mentioned above and other kinds of traditional dancing, kabuki performances and so on.

However, since primordial times, the most important offering that could be made to the deities was that of a human life. In her book on human sacrifice during the Iron Age and Roman Europe, Miranda Green (2002) offers a detailed analysis of the phenomenon, as well as a description of the context, and her findings can very well be applied to the Japanese case. When it comes to the existence of human sacrifice in Japanese culture, the experts' opinions are divided, yet, based on linguistic, archaeological, and ethnographical evidence, I would like to argue that those who claim that the Japanese never performed human sacrifices hold a biased opinion. A common custom still present in contemporary Japanese culture is that of *hina-nagashi*, casting dolls into the sea or the river on March 3rd, currently celebrated as "Girls' Day", but originally a purification ritual before the spring agricultural rites began⁴. On this day, the dolls cast into the water are scapegoats that take along with them the sins and pollution of the entire community, and it is not hard to imagine that they are relatively new replacements for what might have been actual human beings in the old times.

⁴ More on this practice in Chapter 3.

It is not within the scope of this paper to prove (or even debate) the existence of human sacrifice in Japanese culture, at least not voluntary human sacrifice. Nevertheless, human lives have been - accidentally, yet on a somewhat constant basis - offered to the gods during Japanese festivals. Kishiwada Danjiri festival, to give just an example, is well known for accidents leading to death, the most recent example being that of a man who got caught between the *danjiri* and a lamp post, and was crushed to death during a celebration event that took place in April this year⁵. There are voices who say that the number of violent accidents, many resulting in the death of those injured, excluded Kishiwada Danjiri, a countrywide famous festival, from the list of the 33 *dashi* festivals recommended on October 31st, 2016 to be added to the Unesco Intangible Cultural Heritage⁶ list. Another Japanese festival renowned for its casualties is Ombashira, which takes place every seven years in Suwa City, Nagano Prefecture, and involves letting the trunk of a tree on which several men are riding drop down from the top of a steep slope. Even without watching videos of the event, it is clear that serious injuries are a given in this case, which is why this year strict protection measures were enforced, the tree trunk being not as much dropped, as carefully pulled down with ropes. Despite these precaution measures being

⁵ <http://www.sankei.com/west/news/160906/wst1609060089-n1.html> (retrieved on November 8, 2016)

⁶ <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/11/01/national/unesco-panel-recommends-adding-33-japan-festivals-heritage-list/#.WCEaZXdh09c> (retrieved on November 8, 2016)

taken, a man fell while trying to cut down one of the trees used during the festival, and died⁷.



Riding a tree trunk down a slope at Ombashira Festival, Nagano
(April 3rd, 2016)

The end of the 20th century envisioned a society where science and law would take over the role once played by religion, but religion and religious practices are as strong as ever in the 21st century. Even without a declared belief in the existence of divine powers, or an omnipotent god as the one central to Christian or Islamic faiths (to give just two major examples), the Japanese still work to appease their gods. A lay society, with legal and welfare systems well in place, cannot condone the sacrificing of human beings, yet when that happens, it is not quite the catastrophe one might imagine if we were to consider for just a moment the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Human life is precious and should be

⁷ <http://mainichi.jp/articles/20160507/ddl/k20/040/007000c> (retrieved on November 8, 2016)

protected at all costs, yet when gods deem necessary to take more than the food and dances willingly offered, well, it might all be for the good of the community. Discussing the concept of sacrifice, Miranda Green states that “negative connotations of loss are inappropriate. Indeed, the point has been made by a number of scholars that it is mistaken to view sacrifice in other than positive, celebratory terms. In the context of ancient meanings of sacrifice, there seem to have been few undertones of doom, sorrow or renunciation. Sacrificial ceremonies were, on the contrary, associated with rejoicing, with festivities and thanksgiving; they were perceived to facilitate communication with the divine world and therefore to be a cause for elation.” (Green 2002: 19)

In the case of Japanese festivals, it cannot be said that participants rejoice when somebody gets injured or dies, on the contrary, it is a manifestly sad occasion. However, the festival continues as scheduled and its completion, despite any accidents that might have occurred, is considered a success. Moreover, besides the accidental offerings of human lives, the participants turn their hard labor, which in many cases can lead to actual physical damage (as I shall show in my analysis), and which is entirely voluntary, into the most precious type of offering for the gods.

I. Saijo Matsuri

For a better understanding of the relationship between sacrifice and Saijo Matsuri, it is necessary to first give a

description and explanation of the festival itself. Saijo Matsuri consists of four distinct events, each centered around a different shrine. The earliest takes place on October 10^h~11th at Kamo Shrine, followed by Iwaoka Shrine on October 14th~15th, then the third (which is also the biggest one, and the focus of the present study) on October 15th~16th at Isono Shrine, and the last one - very similar in form and ritual development to the more famous Niihama Taiko Matsuri, which happens concurrently in the neighboring town of Niihama - on October 16th~17th at Iizumi Shrine. All three shrines are located within several kilometers of each other in Saijo City, and one of my informants told me that, when he was young (younger, to be precise, as he is still in his thirties), the men would challenge each other to participate in all the events, starting with Iwaoka Shrine and ending in the areas adjacent to Iizumi Shrine. As my informant confessed, actively joining the *matsuri* meant carrying the very heavy *mikoshi* (at Iwaoka Shrine), *danjiri/yatai* (at Isono Shrine) and *taiko* (at Iizumi Shrine) with very little sleep and quite a lot of alcohol for four days, a challenge which resulted, in his case, into a severe nosebleed. The bleeding, something different from the usual physical toll paid by *danjiri* carriers, made him remember what had happened; otherwise, strained muscles, blisters and calluses are something too ordinary to be mentioned.

Structurally speaking, Saijo Matsuri is composed of the three major stages that are the basis of any Japanese festival: welcoming the gods into the community and transporting them from the Shinto shrine to a place that was especially set up for the purpose; entertaining them at that journey place,

and eventually taking them back to the shrine. When discussing the structure of a festival, Plutschow⁸ settles on three concepts to name these particular moments: *kami oroshi* (“the descent or arrival of a deity, the opening of a shrine and the release of its deity, the deity’s awakening from a calm, dormant state, to an alert, dynamic state” 1996: 41), *kami asobi* (including a procession, the offering of food and entertainment - music and dance), and *kami okuri* (“the deities’ dispatch to the place where they originally came from” 1996: 56).

The main deity celebrated during Saijo Matsuri is Amaterasu Ōmikami (the Great Goddess Amaterasu), the Sun Goddess and ancestress of the Imperial House of Japan, who is best known for a mythological incident which is currently seen as the first (and quite complete) description of a *matsuri*. According to *Kojiki* (712 AD, the oldest Japanese record), upset by the behavior of her younger brother Susano-wo, Amaterasu hid in a cave, and only an elaborate ritual, which included divination, the creation and use of special ritual objects, as well as the ecstatic performance of a shamanistic dance by another goddess, Ame-no-Uzume, could make her come out and save the world from eternal darkness. Before she leaves Isono Shrine on the morning of October 15th, all the *danjiri* and *yatai*⁹ that are part of the festival go to pay their

⁸ For analysis purposes, I have chosen to use the concepts as they were described by Herbert Plutschow, this being an academically accepted terminology, and data that I have collected during 11 years of fieldwork (2005~2016) supports this categorization.

⁹ Depending on architectural characteristics, the parade floats used in Japanese festivals have various names: *dashi* (the general term), *danjiri*, *yatai*, *hoko*, *hikiyama*.

respects in a ritual called *miya-dashi* - literally, taking the deity out of the shrine.



A calendar at a local restaurant, on which each passing day is marked in red.

Saijo City is divided into several districts, called *machi* (a geographical division common in Japanese urban areas), and each *machi* has an association - *kumi*, in charge of the *danjiri*. The parade floats are taken out of storage and constructed on the 13th or 14th of October, depending on the weather and the

circumstances of each district, and the members of the *kumi* meet again a few moments before midnight on the night between October 14th and October 15th, for the start of the moment they have been waiting for the entire year. It is not an exaggeration to say that Saijo Matsuri is the most important event in the life of the locals - for some of them, October 17th is the first day of the year, counting down to October 13th of the next year, the eve of the festival.

For four years (starting in 2014), I have been conducting fieldwork within the Sakae-machi Naka-gumi group, and one of its members, currently living in Okinawa, does not return for Obon (the August days set aside to commemorate the dead and an important event in the yearly life of a Japanese family), rarely returns for the New Year, but is always home for Saijo Matsuri.

Soon after midnight on October 15th, the *danjiri* is taken out of its temporary shelter and all *kumi* head towards the main street, where they will first line up before starting the procession towards Isono Shrine. This is a highly significant moment in the life of the community, because it marks the beginning of two days of almost continuous (and, for an outsider, seemingly irrational) backbreaking work, drinking and fun. People come home from all parts of Japan for the festival of their hometown, and reunions are always a happy thing, particularly when they re-confirm one's sense of identity. This particular study is not focused on religious faith and practice, but on what belief-based practices mean for the life of the community, and in this respect I agree with Satsuki

Kawano: "Ritual life is not so much about individual faith as it is about securing the well-being of their families and communities." (2005: 23) By taking part in the local festival once year, each individual not only re-asserts his or her position as a member of the community, but also validates the existence of the community itself and ensures its continuity. Not every Saijo inhabitant loves the festival (on the contrary, quite a few of them are vehemently against an event that interrupts all normal activities for three days and turns the place into a "city of sin" - like human celebrations tend to do), but this festival offers coherence and meaning to the social life of the city.

That first *danjiri* line-up on the main street signals that all is well with the world and that, although known and accepted rules of life will be temporarily suspended, we still live in a world governed by ritual, divine order. Once all the floats have confirmed their presence, the procession toward Isono Shrine begins - about three kilometers through narrow, meandering streets, with houses that are sometimes so close to each other that the *danjiri* almost crash into their eaves. For the duration of the festival, on each important location the place of each parade float is decided through a lottery - a system borrowed from the famous Gion Matsuri, which is considered the model for Saijo Matsuri, and where the lottery system was designed in order to avoid internal conflicts.



On the way to Isono Shrine

The first trial on the way to the goddess is taking the *danjiri* up the stairs that lead to the shrine - an easy walk when one is not carrying 500 kilograms of carved wood on their shoulders. After presenting the float to the deity in front of the main hall, the *danjiri* and their carriers rest for a while, and the view of the eighty-something (the number varies from year to year, depending on the circumstances of each *kumi*, but in recent years there have never been fewer than eighty floats) parade floats, all decorated with exquisite carvings and lit up by lanterns containing real candles is a truly unforgettable view.



Isono Shrine on October 15th, at around 5 am

The float carriers return to their homes for a brief period of rest (usually from 7:30 am to 10 or 10:30), after which they start walking around the city, to entertain the people with the view of their beautiful *danjiri* and to collect donations from both companies and individuals. A member of the Sakae-machi Naka-gumi told me that, when he was a child (about thirty years ago), the donations were sufficient for the upkeep of the *danjiri*, but nowadays they are rather symbolic, and the expenses related to the necessary repairs or improvements are funded by the members of the group. This is not surprising, considering the ever-growing number of *danjiri*. Despite the astronomical costs of a new parade float, despite concerns related to the aging of the population and the decrease in the

number of men able to endure such a test of physical strength, the number of *danjiri* has not been going down, on the contrary.



On the streets of Saijo City (October 15th)

This walk around the city is part of the *kami-asobi*, entertainment for the deities and the humans alike, and it culminates with a new gathering of all the *danjiri* at *otabisho* - the journey place, the place that had been especially set up for the deity - which takes place at 1 am on October 16th.



Entertaining the deity (temporarily dwelling in the *mikoshi* in the photo on the left) with a display of strength and skill (the *danjiri* is lifted above the carriers' heads in front of the sacred gate)



Otabisho - entertainment for the gods (October 16th, 4am)

From there, without a break, the *danjiri* continue the procession and line up again in front of Saijo High School, the place of the former residence of the local lord. Once arrived, they can rest for about an hour (even more, depending on the arrival time), after which the hardest part begins: three kilometers to the river, where the *danjiri* are lined up again and where lunch is served, and about six more kilometers back to Isono Shrine, for *miya-iri*, returning the deity to its permanent abode. The view of the eighty or ninety *danjiri* lined up under the brilliant blue sky of Japanese autumns is impressive to say the least, and this is also the day when the participants waver between pure exhaustion and the exuberance of the celebration.





A brief rest on the way back to the shrine and
the final line-up by the river

It is a conscious “last” effort that takes the *danjiri* up by the River Kamo, in the vicinity of Isono Shrine, where the carriers know that the hardest part is over. The *mikoshi* (portable shrine where only the deity can ride) attempts to cross the river, but the humans are not yet ready to let go, and for a few moments some of the *danjiri* try to prevent the *mikoshi* from returning to the shrine. This particular moment is called *kawa-iri*, when ten *danjiri* are carried into the river, a relatively young practice, dating from 1952. According to the locals, on October 16, 1952, a group of elders dared the young men to take the *danjiri* into the river, promising them a bottle of sake if they accomplished the feat - a substantial reward seven years after the end of the war, when good alcohol was

hard to come by. The young men did raise to the challenge, thus creating one more rite to be observed, and extending for a few brief minutes the time spent with the deity. (Yasunaga 2009: 68-69)

Yet no one can stop the sun from following its course, and the *matsuri* thus comes to an end. In the moments that follow, the participants seem to forget exhaustion and muscle pain, and an almost palpable feeling of sadness (as an observer, I have always thought it was something similar to Christmas morning, after opening the presents, when I knew that the best part was over and it would be one year until I would get the same feeling of anticipation and joy) pervades the air. The ritual has been successfully completed, but for a brief moment, seemingly frozen in time, the order of the world is out of place and the humans struggle to remember the rules. It is only a brief moment - after all, one of the intrinsic purposes of the *matsuri* is to re-establish and reclaim order over chaos in the universe - but the drained bodies of the participants need that moment in order to turn the almost mystical elation that helped them complete their tasks into a more human feeling.



The final moment of the festival, when the *mikoshi* containing the deity (on the left of the photo) tries to cross the river towards Isono Shrine.

II. Sacrifice and entertainment

Seen from the outside, Saijo Matsuri is undoubtedly an event and an experience one is not likely to forget. The ceremonial floats constructed to entertain the gods have borrowed something from almost all major Japanese festivals: the sacred *mikoshi* which appears in all *matsuri*, the exquisitely carved *danjiri* which definitely owe their woodwork to the artistic tradition of Kishiwada (Osaka Prefecture), and the structure as a whole to Gion Matsuri, and what the locals call “mikoshi”, a type of *taiko* - floats with huge wheels, decorated with lavish embroideries and golden tassels. And everything in this festival seems taken to the extreme, both the ritual objects (the number of the *danjiri* is double that of *hoko* from Gion Matsuri) and the human efforts. Even as a passive observer, following Saijo Matsuri from beginning to the end is not an easy enterprise. Last year, for example, in the morning of October 16th, I realized that it was still before 9 and I had already walked fifteen kilometers. And the heaviest object I had with me was my camera, while the members of Sakae-machi Naka-gumi, whom I was walking with, carried on their shoulders half a ton.

One of my first informants showed me how a bone in his left shoulder was sticking out - the result of a particularly difficult year, when not only did they not have enough men to carry the *danjiri*, but they were also of different height, which led to a hard, imbalanced pilgrimage through the streets of Saijo. Other informants were wearing knee supporters and rugby pads on their shoulders. Originally, women were not

allowed to even touch the *danjiri* - their role within the festival was to serve food, or to admire the procession from their gardens, dressed in their Sunday best. Nowadays, young women follow their brothers, boyfriends, or classmates during the procession, join them in offering libations to the gods and sometimes even help carry the *danjiri*, a fact not entirely to the liking of the older generation, who deplors the loss of tradition. The fact that it was not permitted for women to touch the parade float can be discussed on at least two different discourse levels (gender and sacred practices), yet an obvious reality is that most women do not have the necessary strength to support the weight of the *danjiri*.

The question that remains is why would any member of our contemporary society, particularly that of a technologically advanced country, where science can explain droughts and prevent plagues, willingly submit himself to two days of what can be easily defined as self-inflicted pain? There are two obvious sides to Saijo Matsuri: one is represented by the meals members of the *kumi* share, meals prepared by their female relatives, where the entire family joins. The food, like the food sold at street stalls, is nothing extraordinary in itself, would probably be less than average if consumed in a restaurant, but it is spiced with the irresistible festival atmosphere. The men working for the gods are exhausted, and the women bring comfort food: fresh rice balls, *udon* noodles, rice and curry, hot miso soup with vegetables. And the men call for their children to join them, even if they have just arrived, because the food shared with the gods is sacred

and will bless them for the year to come. The symbolism of these meals where the gods are assumed to be present is a deep, universal one, and, although rarely perceived as such, one of the most important purposes of the *matsuri*. If the rituals based on Japanese beliefs are performed in order to gain the gods' benevolence, then what clearer sign that the goal has been achieved than the opportunity to share a meal with the divine guests? They are not, obviously, visible, but the mere fact that the *matsuri* can continue as planned means that the deities are satisfied, appeased.

The second aspect of the festival is this apparently irrational effort that leads to physical pain and potential injuries. Most Japanese festivals include at least one event where men have the chance to display their "manliness" - pure strength or endurance, be it related to cold, fire, or pain. But this is not the only interpretation that can be given to this type of attitude; indeed, I would like to argue that a show of strength is in fact a minor element. In the case of Saijo Matsuri, where everything is a group effort, no individual has the chance to stand out, except for when he collapses of either fatigue or too much alcohol. I have used the term before in my analysis and I would like to emphasize it: each step taken on the streets of Saijo while carrying the *danjiri* is a step taken towards the completion of a pilgrimage. Every drop of sweat, every pulled muscle and every instant of pain is an offering to the gods. For two days (or even more), the men work for the gods the way they used to work the fields before the festival began, giving back that spark of divinity which is supposed to

have been shared with the humans from times immemorial. Nobody talks about this kind of sacrifice, the way nobody talks about the gods being there to share a bowl of hot curry with the men and their offspring, because these are not things one talks about in the 21st century, but the tradition continues uninterrupted.

Legends about foundation sacrifice (human beings sacrificed to ensure that a new construction will stand) abound around the world; Francois-Rene Chateaubriand asserted as early as 1802 that “among the various peoples of the earth, the religious ceremonies are born of sacrifice¹⁰.” (1836: 60) In Japanese, the concept is called *hitobashira* - a human pillar to support the edifice. There are no records of intentional human sacrifices (not even symbolic ones) during Saijo Matsuri, because in this case, it is not the life of one human being, but the life force of all the participants that is offered to the deities, thus being renewed together with the divine force within the natural cycle present in all agrarian societies. There is no Eucharist in the traditional Japanese system of beliefs; nonetheless, during each festival, food is ritually shared during rituals that commemorate sacrifice and celebrate the resurrection of the fertility god.

¹⁰ Author's translation.

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The Summer Phoenix: Community and Masculinity within the Ôtori Mikoshi Group

Tenjin Matsuri is a millennium-old extravaganza of sound, movement, light and color dedicated to the god Tenjin: fireworks to appease the god of thunder, and the sweat of the commoners to pacify the ghost of an aristocrat scholar. The connection between the legend of Sugawara-no-Michizane, the scholar and politician exiled from the capital in the 10th century, whose vengeful ghost supposedly wreaked havoc in the imperial city several years after his death, and a place of worship in Osaka is not a particularly strong one. According to records from Osaka Tenmangu Shrine, fifty years after the death of Michizane, seven pine trees appeared all of a sudden in front of a shrine in Osaka, emitting a mysterious light at night, which made people think that the spirit of Michizane was there, and needed to be pacified through the establishment of a shrine in his name, and the organization of a festival.



Ôtori Mikoshi during the boat parade (July 25th, 2016)

Although in most cases it is difficult to ascertain whether a myth is the basis of a ritual, or whether the story was added later to the practice in order to give it more credibility and weight, this particular myth of origin does not seem to have a solid ground. Nevertheless, the festival itself has become so famous that nobody questions the authenticity of its relationship with the god of thunder and scholars. One of the three great festivals of Japan, Tenjin Matsuri takes place every year on July 25th, and what most people know about it is the *funa-togyo*, the boat parade on the river, accompanied by the spectacular firework display, but the events and ceremonies surrounding Tenjin Matsuri are much richer and complicated than that. The present paper is a brief analysis of the community created around one of the *kô* (local associations in charge of specific events and rites during the festival), Ôtori Mikoshi Group. Due to the generous support of

Mr. Yoshiki Miyamoto, head of the Ôtori Mikoshi Group, I have been able to closely observe their activities for an extended period of time, as well as interview several members of the group. My research related to Tenjin Matsuri and the practices from Osaka Tenmangu Shrine is still in its initial stages, and this paper represents the first step towards a more comprehensive discussion of this cultural phenomenon.

The Mikoshi

According to Jinja Honchô (The Association of Shinto Shrines), the term *mikoshi* has been used since the Heian Period to designate a vehicle for the gods, in which the deity worshipped at a particular shrine is carried around the area once a year, during the local festival, in order to observe directly the lives of the believers (*Jinja no iroha* 2016: 114-115). In English, *mikoshi* is often translated as “portable shrine,” but in this paper I shall use the original term, as it the best suited to the purpose. The *mikoshi* displaying a golden phoenix (*hôren*) on top was used as a vehicle for the Emperor during special ceremonies, that is why nowadays it is regarded as the most important at shrines that have more than one - the sacred object where the spirit of the deity is transferred for the duration of the festival. Osaka Tenmangu Shrine possesses such a *mikoshi*, the *go-hôren*, used to take the spirit of Sugawara-no-Michizane around the neighborhood on July 25th, but it is a relatively new addition (from Meiji Period) to

the festival. Until then, Tenjin Matsuri was centered around Ôtori Mikoshi (The Phoenix Portable Shrine) and Tama Mikoshi (The Tama Portable Shrine), two sacred vessels that moved together during the *riku-togyo* (land parade) and *funa-togyo*. The *mikoshi* still in use today were apparently crafted during the latter half of the Edo Period by a master shipbuilder. (*Tenjin Matsuri Festival* 2007: 27) Records from the Osaka Tenmangu Culture Institute indicate that Ôtori Mikoshi was the one that hosted the spirit of Sugawara-no-Michizane (the god Tenjin) until 1876, after which, as a consequence of the anti-Buddhist movement, it became a shrine for the spirit of Nomino-Sukune, an ancestor of the Sugawara family.



Ôtori Mikoshi and Tama Mikoshi at Osaka Tenmangu Shrine
(July 24th, 2017)



Ôtori Mikoshi and Tama Mikoshi in front of the Main Hall of Osaka Tenmangu, before leaving for the land parade (July 25th, 2017)

Ôtori Mikoshi, the “Phoenix Shrine,” makes a very short public appearance: less than a week each year, from July 20th or 21st until July 26th. From the first time I had the chance to witness the construction and de-construction of a parade float during Saijo Matsuri, I experienced the same feeling I had as a child when we decorated, then took apart the Christmas tree: excitement and elation, followed by a lingering feeling of sadness. An event anticipated for the best part of a year ended again, everything was put back in its rightful place, and the year until it would happen again seemed to extend for an eternity. The comparison is by no

means a coincidence; both the Christmas tree and the *mikoshi* or *dashi* (parade floats) serve as temporary abodes of the gods, symbolical bridges between the sacred and the profane worlds. In Japanese, the appropriate term would be *yorishiro*, the “place (or object or person) inhabited by a kami's spirit when it descends for a religious ceremony¹,” and the *mikoshi* is revered as such when it is taken out the storage room within the Osaka Tenmangu precincts.



Ōtori Mikoshi inside the storage room

¹ Okada Yoshiyuki. *Encyclopedia of Shinto* http://k-amc.kokugakuin.ac.jp/DM/dbSearchList.do?class_name=col_eos&search_condition_type=1&db_search_condition_type=0&View=0&focus_type=0&startNo=1&searchFreeword=yorishiro&searchRangeType=0 (accessed on March 5, 2019)



Placing the golden phoenix on top of the portable shrine - a gesture almost identical with the placement of the angel or star on top of the Christmas tree

Once the *mikoshi* is assembled, it will remain in its place inside the Shrine yard for a few days, to be admired by community members and tourists alike, until the afternoon of July 25th, Tenjin Matsuri day, when, after it is formally presented in front of the Main Hall, it joins the land and boat parade. Weighing approximately two tons, the *mikoshi* is carried by about 70 men at a time, the two hundred volunteer participants taking turns during the day. On the way to the pier, they will stop to formally greet (using the Osaka-*jime*²) various institutions, businesses, and community members. As the sun sets, the *mikoshi* reaches the riverside, where a crane transfers it onto a boat for the two-hour *funa-togyo*. Since a divine spirit is supposed to be residing inside, fireworks explode as the Ôtori boat passes by, and the people in the other boats or on the riverside respectfully bow their heads.



² The Osaka “greeting”: *Uchimashô! Mô hitotsu se! Iôte sando !* [Let’s clap (clapping twice)! Once more (clapping twice)! Let’s celebrate three times (clapping three times)!]



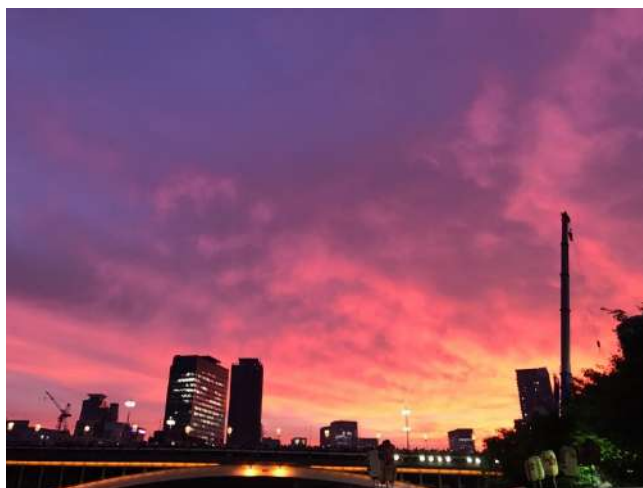
Leaving Osaka Tenmangu Shrine (July 25th, 2018)



Osaka-jime performed in front a local store



The parade in central Osaka



Transferring the *mikoshi* onto the boat, and a particularly spectacular sunset which most participants saw as a sign of the gods' benevolence

On the boat, a priest performs a *shinji* - a ritual that includes purification, offerings, and a prayer soliciting the good will of the deity present among the parishioners. As Michael Ashkenazi notices, not many of the attendants of Tenjin Matsuri are familiar or even aware of the meaning of the *shinji*: “To the casual observer, even the major ritual of a shrine hardly appears to be an important part of the festival [...] most festival- goers are neither present when the ritual is performed nor aware of its time and venue.” (1993: 7) This may be true for the outside participants, who are guests on the boats managed by the Ôtori Mikoshi Group, but the group members fully perceive the moment as a sacred one. As an anecdote, in 2018 one of the youngest members of the group was insistently harassed by two female guests who seemed to have over-indulged in the celebratory atmosphere. The young man in question did his best to politely avoid their attentions, but another member of the group, hearing about the incident afterwards, solemnly stated that such gestures should be clearly rejected because “we (the community members) have been purified and are working for the *kami-sama*.” This attitude is perfectly coherent with Helen Hardacre’s definition of matsuri “performed as if they defined the lifeworld of the community, a bounded space and time, in which all existence is imbued with a particular meaning.” (2017: 475) For two days, the men in charge of the sacred vessel of the gods live in a universe separate from the daily world, their bodies purified and sacralized themselves through proximity with the divine, a state they must preserve

as a sign of respect towards the deity, and in order to maintain the pre-established ritual order.



The ritual performed during the *funa-togyo*

Once the *funa-togyo* is completed, the *mikoshi* is returned to the Shrine, where both Ôtori Mikoshi and Tama Mikoshi are carried several times around the precincts (to the enjoyment of the viewers), before the deity is returned to its regular dwelling inside the Main Hall. This last rite, performed for the spirits carried by the two *mikoshi* mentioned above, not just the Go-Hôren (*kami-okuri*, “sending

off the deity” - Plutschow 2007: 42) is a new addition to the *matsuri*, being introduced in 2018 by the new head priest of Osaka Tenmangu, Mr. Taneharu Terai. Like all similar performances that can be observed within Japanese festivals, this *mikoshi* parade is a display of strength and masculinity, a symbol of human health and power that can overcome the disease brought about either by the oppressive Japanese summer or the wrath of the gods, entertainment and sacrifice for both the human and the divine participants. It is most definitely a feat of endurance for the carriers (most of whom will have serious bruises at the end of the day), but mainly for the men in charge, who also bear the responsibility for the welfare of everybody involved and the smooth development of the *matsuri*. The last moments before placing the *mikoshi* back into its place within the Shrine precincts seem to be the most precious, when exhaustion is forgotten and euphoria is the dominant feeling, a literal embodiment of the characteristics described by Hardacre: “Young men who bear the *mikoshi* are expected to manifest ecstatic behavior, as the Kami within the sacred palanquin whirled it about according to divine will and irresistible sacred power. Through costume and ecstatic behavior, the individual becomes one with the group; this oneness is the meaning of ‘communitas’.” (2017: 475)



The last moments spent in the presence of the divine spirit,
in front of the Main Hall of Osaka Tenmangu Shrine

The Community

On July 25th, almost 250 people are involved in the ceremonies related to the Ôtori Mikoshi, but the actual community is formed of about 30 permanent members, and for them belonging to (and supporting) the Ôtori Mikoshi Group is not just participating in a colorful festival once a year, but an entire way of life. They are chosen based on recommendations from active members, the necessary conditions being that they must be locals (living in the Kannan area), and already fulfilling some other function in the community (for example, one of my informants received

the suggestion to join the group when he was head of the parent-teacher association at his children's kindergarten). Once they become full-fledged members of the group, they no longer carry the *mikoshi*³, but before that they must have experience of at least one or two years as carriers. Mr. Yoshiaki Miyamoto, who has been the *kô-moto* ("group leader") for the past six years, has been involved with Ôtori Mikoshi for over 30 years, becoming a *hakama yakuin* (organizer, literally "a person in charge wearing formal clothes") in 1985, after having been a carrier for just one year, because one of the other members could not fulfill his duties due to a death in the family. It must be said here that all the members take the concepts of ritual pollution and purification very seriously, which means that, if there is a death in the family, the respective member cannot join the formal events during that particular year, as he is seen as polluted through the connection with death⁴.

Being one of the permanent members of the group can be time consuming, that is why all of the members I interviewed

³ The men who carry the *mikoshi* on July 25th are volunteers who apply for the position in April-May each year. There is no selection process, the carriers being chosen on a first-come, first-served basis.

⁴ "People who upset the order of things by bringing pollution into a ritual space or into a community were treated as in transgression (*tsumi*), and a ritual purification (*harae*) was also required. In the *Jingiryô* (Laws on Deities) there were regulations regarding purification and taboos concerning mourning, visiting the sick, eating meat, capital punishment, determining punishment, and evil pollutions." Nishioka Kazuhiko. Encyclopedia of Shinto. http://k-amc.kokugakuin.ac.jp/DM/dbSearchList.do?class_name=col_eos&search_condition_type=1&db_search_condition_type=0&View=0&focus_type=0&startNo=1&searchFreeword=kegare&searchRangeType=0 (accessed on March 3, 2019).

appeared to be quite passionate about this aspect of their lives. Mr. Miyamoto remembers being first a member of the *shishi-mai* ("lion dance") and *kasa-odori* ("umbrella dance") when he was an elementary school student, quitting for a while because he had to focus on his studies and examinations, then joining again in 1984. 1984 was also the year when the local community decided to take back their *mikoshi* and the ceremonies surrounding it, which until then had been conducted with the help of people from Suita City (due to the lack of volunteers to carry the *mikoshi*). Mr. Takehiro Hirai, initially a parishioner of another important shrine in Osaka, Ikutama Jinja, decided to move to the Tenma district when he got married, because he saw it as a good environment for his family, especially for his children, and joined the festival by invitation. Mr. Hirotada Kojima, a native of the area, was invited to join when he and his family moved into his grandmother's house after she had passed away - his grandfather had been an active member of the Go-Hôren Kô. To quote Mr. Masami Inoue, one reason for doing this is that they "have a sense of accomplishment, of doing something together." Mr. Inoue and Mr. Matsumoto also acknowledge a religious feeling in connection to their work together, appreciating when people bow their heads at the passing of the *mikoshi*.

As mentioned above, their activities are not limited to the parade on July 25th. On July 23rd, the Ôtori Mikoshi Group also organizes the *kodomo mikoshi* ("children's mikoshi") parade through the Kita Shinchî district in Osaka, followed by formal visits to various local bars and restaurants, to greet

the owners and customers, and share the joy and blessings of the festival. This round of visits to local business continues throughout the following day, and is repeated on January 9th and 10th during the Ebisu Matsuri, when members of the Ôtori Mikoshi Group act as representatives of Osaka Tenmangu Shrine, and take bamboo branches with good-luck amulets to (almost) the same places they visited in summer.



*Kodomo Mikoshi (July 23rd, 2018) Visit to a local TV station,
Kansai Terebi (July 24th, 2018)*



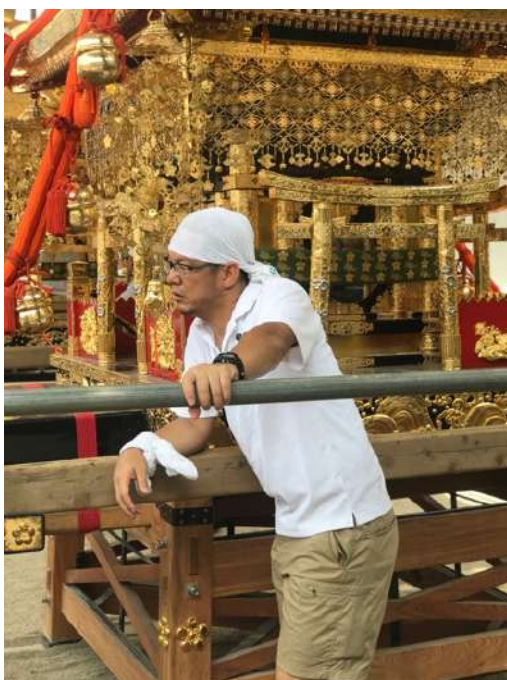
Visit to a local store on January 9th, 2019. Impersonating Ebisu, the God of Fortune, is Mr. Kazuo Ikeda, one of the permanent members of Ôtori Mikoshi.

One year for Mr. Miyamoto (the group leader and main intermediary between the other members and the larger community) sometimes includes more than one event per month, starting with the offering of sake to people who pay the first visit of the year at Osaka Tenmangu at midnight on January 1st, and continuing with the Ebisu Matsuri, a formal visit (together with representatives of the other *kô* and the head priest of Osaka Tenmangu) to a different shrine, participation in the Hatsu Tenjin ceremony (January 25th), which celebrates the men turning 60 that year, in the

Setsubun parade in February, the plum and cherry blossom viewing parties, as well as many other reunions whose purpose is to improve the relationships between the members of different *kô*, and strengthen their ties with the community. As leader of the group, Mr. Miyamoto has to attend more events and meetings than the regular members, but he is often accompanied by several other *hakama yakuin*, who may be either a symbolic presence, or have a practical duty, as is the case during the Yabusame Shinji on October 25th, when community members are recruited to keep the order and protect the onlookers during the mounted archery ritual.

The local elementary school, Nishi Tenma Sho Gakkô, is another focus of activity, with members present (often as parents, but after their children graduate, as sport coaches or simply community representatives) during the entrance and graduation ceremonies. Also, in the tug-of-war competition organized by the school, the two teams are named Ôtori and Tama - an indication not of rivalry, but of the way the two *mikoshi* teams work together. Mr. Miyamoto actually emphasized the fact that, although there used to be some rivalry between the two *mikoshi* groups, he has made consistent efforts to have them act together, putting the ideal of working for the gods and the concept of safety above personal pride. The fact that nowadays the two *mikoshi* move almost at the same time is one of the innovations he implemented, together with introducing a compulsory insurance system in case of accidents.

Osaka is a city of 2.6 million people, yet being allowed to follow the activities of the Ôtori Mikoshi Group I felt like I was back home, in my small town of about 7,000 inhabitants, a feeling confirmed by Mr. Miyamoto, who declared that the area around Osaka Tenmangu is a “village within a big city.” A place where newcomers may find it difficult to adjust due to the pre-existent, solid community ties, but where the members actually know each other and work together for a common purpose. The permanent members of the Ôtori Mikoshi Group do act for the welfare of their community, and during the festival they become role models for their children; to quote Mr. Miyamoto again, “I want them to look good in front of their children, to make them feel proud.” To end this section of my analysis, I chose two photos taken on July 26th, the day when the *mikoshi* is taken back into storage, and when fatigue is almost forgotten due to the sadness at having to say good-bye for yet another year to such an important part of their lives. In the first one, a very young member of the community is entertained with the *mikoshi* decorations, in the second - one of the men in charge rests for a moment. They are both instances that illustrate the deep connection between a sacred symbol and human life as most of us know and experience it - the *mikoshi* is still an object of worship, yet at the same time it is an inextricable part of daily life, sacred and familiar at the same time.



Masculinity

As it may have been obvious from my analysis so far, the world of Ôtori Mikoshi Kô is an exclusively masculine one, for both practical - women are not seen as physically inclined to carry on their shoulders a distributed weight of about 30 kilograms, for several hours - and symbolic reasons - being in contact with menstrual blood once a month, as well as the blood that accompanies birth, women are seen as polluted and should not touch the sacred vehicle of the gods. Although all group members have been extremely courteous and welcoming, allowing me to ask questions at any time and take all the photos I wanted, I was clearly instructed not to touch the *mikoshi* after the spirit of the god was transferred onto it. That was seen as a minimum restriction, but many members see the female touch as polluting even when the god is not assumed present. This was one aspect that most of my informants found difficult to expand upon without feeling impolite towards myself, a woman, when declaring women to be less pure than men. Familiar with this concept (which is not singular to Shinto, my own grandmother taught me when I reached puberty that I should not enter a church if I was menstruating), I did not insist upon it during the interviews, and it is not my intention to discuss the topic in detail here. What I would like to emphasize is that all the participants I talked to were of the same opinion: while women may take part in the *matsuri*, when it comes to *mikoshi*, they should be spectators, not actors. Before Tenjin Matsuri, on July 23rd, there is an event where women can carry a *mikoshi*, called

gyaru (“gal”) *mikoshi*, but, in order to make a clear distinction between an object used for a community event and the sacred vehicle for the gods, hiragana characters are used for *gyaru mikoshi* (ギャルみこし) and *kodomo mikoshi* (子どもみこし), instead of the kanji characters 神輿.

Researchers agree that masculinity is a concept whose definition keeps changing with time; in the case of Japan, various prototypes have defined it across centuries: the warrior, the worker, the athlete, the salaryman. As Brigitte Steger and Angelica Koch succinctly phrase it in their edited study on contemporary Japanese masculinity, the question is “What makes a man a man? [...] Do they need to be tough protectors of women and children? Reliable financial providers able to create a comfortable home for a family? Own fancy cars to take beautiful girls for drives and shower them with expensive gifts?” (2017: 8) The members of Ôtori Mikoshi Group seem to closely relate to the first two aspects mentioned above, seeing the role of husband and father as the most important of their lives. From this perspective, they embody a type of village masculinity: “Rural social mechanisms were hierarchically structured to produce men whose superior masculinity was based on their maturity. These mechanisms not only worked to exclude women but also to manage women as wives, mothers, and objects of sexual desire.” (Frühstück & Walthall 2011 8-9) That an analysis of a 19th century village still applies in the 21st century society may seem surprising to say the least, but we are, after all, talking about a village surrounded by

skyscrapers. My informants did not only clearly say that they see themselves as fulfilling these roles, because it is their duty to do the “hard jobs,” but also expressed their unease in regard to the changes in contemporary society. I conducted some of my interviews in the summer of 2018, when the Me Too Movement made the news in Japan as well, and I often got unelicited statements such as “because of this talk about sexual harassment, it has become more difficult than ever to talk to women,” under any circumstances. The changes in the lay society appeared to threaten the ritual society as well, where men had been secure in their roles of powerful and protective individuals.

On the other hand, it is undoubtable that *matsuri otoko* (“men who take part in festivals,” donning the specific attire) become instantly more attractive due both to their display of strength, and to the association with an event that does not pertain to the daily, ordinary world. Without exception, all the female informants (of various nationalities) I asked agreed that *matsuri otoko* are good looking, a fact that the performers themselves found it more difficult to verbally acknowledge, but which was clear from their behavior. One informant had the courage to say that he does think he looks cool in matsuri attire, and that he feels the people around envy him for his privileged position, while others simply opted to change in the special yukata worn on July 25th in the middle of the street, in plain view of the passers-by, although a private changing space was available.



Group members in their headquarters on July 24th



In front of the *mikoshi* on the evening of the same day

At a first glance, the situation described above might invite accusations of gender discrimination; however, after more than one year spent in the company of the Ôtori Mikoshi

members, it is my belief that their way of thinking is based on a segregation of roles that might seem obsolete to some of the readers, but which does not necessarily operate in terms of superiority or inferiority. This fairly closed and tightknit community needs strict and non-ambiguous rules in order to keep functioning towards its proposed goals, and these rules assign specific roles to its members. The masculine ideal may be that of a strong protector and able provider, yet that does not always ensure a position of authority within the family. One group member told me that the matsuri days are the only ones when he can “really feel like a man, not afraid of the scary wife,” and he also gave the example of another member, with a very severe wife, who acts like a medieval lord during the festival “because it is the only time when he can afford to do so.”

The “days of the Phoenix” are definitely not easy for the organizers, that is something they have unanimously agreed upon, due to the combination of increased responsibility, summer heat, and hard labor, but membership in the group is not a mere pastime, it is a passion and a vocation. Through their work for the Ôtori Mikoshi Group, its members create a better community for their families, establish lifelong friendships, and, for two days, allow outsiders to enjoy the wondrous world of Tenjin Matsuri.



Formal greeting exchange on the eve of Tenjin Matsuri

Conclusions

A few months ago, after having been accepted as a member of *Ujiko Seinen Kai* (The Association of Young Parishioners - a slightly ironical name, as the youngest members are in their late thirties), I found myself holding a rake and attempting to gather the leaves scattered in the precincts of Osaka Tenmangu. It was neither a form of initiation, nor punishment; simply, one of the regular activities of *Ujiko Seinen Kai* is to meet on the first Sunday of the month for thirty minutes of cleaning at the Shrine. Not entirely sure how to use the wooden rake to get the leaves from under the pebbles in the shrine yard, I had a “Karate Kid” moment: menial work is conducive to enlightenment. Yet nobody was looking for spiritual initiation there, and the cleaning we did was symbolic. The actual purpose of the meeting was to

strengthen the ties between the members and their awareness of belonging to a community. As emphasized by Arne Kalland (1977), the ritual becomes a form of “communication between people, and not necessarily between men and deity,” and this is one of the aspects that makes the Ôtori Mikoshi community a particularly strong one. During the *matsuri*, most members (at least those I interviewed) acknowledge the presence of the deity, whom they refer to with all the proper awe and reverence, but the rest of the time their group is supported by the tight relationships between the members. They came together to work for the gods, and this common goal turned their group into a tightknit social unit that acts together for the individual benefit of the members and their families, as well as representatives of the greater area where they live.

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Salt, Fire and Water: Means of Entering the Sacred

Pollution and purification are two concepts often used in relation to traditional Japanese culture and its characteristic rituals. From the elegant wells placed near the entrance to shrines, inviting visitors and believers alike to perform the customary ablutions (sometimes clear instructions are displayed in plain view), to the mounds of salt placed near house gates or restaurant doors, to fierce-looking *yamabushi* who walk on fire, life in Japan is abundant in symbols whose purpose is to separate the sacred from the profane, and to provide purification tools in order to prevent disease, misfortune, or the wrath of gods.

In any culture, a ritual act represents a complex enterprise that requires physical and mental preparation on the part of the performer, and a highly significant role in that process is held by purification. In Japanese tradition, *harae* (“purification”) is a ritual gesture meant to remove all evil and pollution that might disturb one’s connection with the sacred. In Japan, purification is performed before all religious rites and

various other relevant events in the life of the community, as well as each time an individual pays a visit to a shrine.

When performed by a priest, the purification rite involves the use of a *heihaku* (a wand with white paper strips) waved in front of the object of the ritual. This is a gesture that can be observed in the initial stage of all Shinto rituals, emphasizing the importance of symbolical cleanliness before any kind of contact with the sacred can be established. The ablutions that are meant to remove all possible defilement from the body and the spirit are called *misogi* and the origins of this custom are recorded in the ancient chronicles *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*. Izanagi, the male of the primordial couple, goes on a journey to the other world in an attempt to bring back his wife, the goddess Izanami, who had died giving birth to the Fire God. Izanagi's quest fails because, like Orpheus, he breaks the taboo of not looking back and sees his wife's decomposing body. Upon his return to the world of the living, Izanagi must cleanse his body of all the pollution accumulated during his contact with the world of the dead. The purification rite performed by Izanagi involves water only - as E. O. James stated, water is the "universal cleanser," and "it figures prominently in magico-religious cult [...] as the normal means of washing away material or spiritual pollution." (1955 12: 704-706)

Laymen and priests alike can purify themselves by rinsing their mouth and pouring clear water over their hands in a ritual act called *temizu* ("hand water"), or they can perform *misogi*, the whole-body purification. This ritual,

although it may seem obsolete, is still widely practiced and respected in Japanese society, to the extent that some shrines actually post instruction boards near the water wells, explaining to the visitors how to perform the ablutions: first wash your left hand, then your right hand, then rinse your mouth, without touching the provided wooden dipper directly with your lips.

Nevertheless, water is not the only way of establishing a connection with the sacred or of removing pollution. In Japanese culture, the three elements that facilitate the passage from the sacred to the profane are salt, fire and water, each having a distinct, characteristic function while at the same time maintaining a strong relationship with the other two.

Salt

Of the three, salt is the most commonly seen outside ceremonial occasions and it is viewed as a substance that is not only indispensable to daily life, but also as a magical instrument that can ward off evil forces. That is why salt is usually placed in small mounds at the gate or near the entrance to houses and stores, used by Shinto priests in purification rituals or by sumo wrestlers before the beginning of a match. Salt is also a type of offering to the gods, and Yanagita Kunio mentions a legend about salt placed under a bridge, which disappears overnight, meaning that the god accepted the offering. However, while the gods seem to like offerings of salt, evil forces are repelled by it; ghosts and

monsters crave sweet things, such as rice buns filled with sweet bean paste, yet they abhor the sight of salt (1968: 462). Nowadays, people who attend a funeral receive a small gift that is always accompanied by a small sachet of salt, to purify themselves after the contact with death.



Salt at the entrance of a restaurant in Osaka
Purifying salt received at a funeral

One special event when the magical function of salt becomes apparent is the *Hari kuyō*¹ ceremony from Awashima Shrine in Wakayama. *Hari kuyō* (“religious service for needles”) is a ritual conducted annually on February 8th, when rusty or blunt needles from all over the country are collected at the shrine in order to receive a symbolic burial. This is also an occasion to express gratitude towards these inanimate objects which have been particularly useful during daily life, that is why the ceremony is attended by

¹ Field work conducted in February 2011.

seamstresses from various areas of Japan. The ritual itself is very short: rich offerings of vegetables and *sake* are given to the gods, the priest chants a brief prayer, after which the *miko* carry trays with needles and with salt to the *shio-zuka* ("salt mound"), a big rock placed on the left side of the main hall. Another prayer is said in front of the stone representing the grave for needles, which are afterwards solemnly interred, with salt poured on top of them.



Miko carrying trays of salt



Salt covered needles

Yanagita considers that the magical powers attributed to salt come from the connection between salt and seawater, as seawater was always present in old rituals and used both as a purification instrument and as an offering to the gods (1968). In the case of *Hari kuyō*, it is possible that salt was used the same way fire is used to burn old prayer tablets – objects that are no longer useful in the human world must be sent to the other world through one of the elements that can facilitate the passage, and, as metal needles do not burn, salt is used as a substitute for fire.

Fire

Fire, on the other hand, seems to be viewed as the most powerful element, able to both bring something of the sacred into this world and to open the gates to the other. Izanami, the mother-goddess who created the Japanese Archipelago and most of the Japanese gods, died giving birth to the Fire God, an episode that is relevant from two perspectives: first, Izanami's death represents in itself a myth of origin, as death did not, could not exist until it happened for the first time; second, it is fire that facilitates the transition from one level of existence to another. Izanami died, but that does not mean that she disappeared; on the contrary, she continues to exist in the world of shadows, changing her role as creator for that of destroyer and death-bringer.

Fire is still used in Japanese rituals to establish a connection between the known world, inhabited by living

humans, and the world of spirits and things passed. In the beginning of every year, shrines all over Japan make huge bonfires named *dondoyaki*, where used New Year decorations and amulets are burned. At Buddhist temples, similar fires are lit for the burning of prayer tablets and amulets that had been used during the previous year. In both cases, the objects to be cremated are not viewed as no longer useful, but rather as something that has fulfilled its role on this existential level and must now ritually pass into the other, fire being the potent element which opens the pathway.



Dondoyaki at Yoshida Shrine, Kyoto (February 3rd, 2011)

A special ceremony named *Saitō Ōgomaku* is performed at the Shingon temple Gangōji² in Nara on *Setsubun* day (February 3rd). *Goma* (originating in the Sanskrit *homa*) is a term referring to an esoteric Buddhist ritual in which offerings are made to the deity Fudō Myōō (Acalanātha in Sanskrit, a deity who embodies Enlightenment and who is described with flames surging from his body) in order to prevent calamities and increase merit. The offerings are made through fire, the burning of firewood symbolizing the destruction by wisdom of evil passions and karma. The fact that at Gangōji this ritual takes place on *Setsubun*, a day when demons are exorcized all over the country, is highly significant, as the two rituals work for the same objective: getting rid of all evil, be it visible (such as evil forces that manifest themselves through natural calamities) or invisible (all the base thoughts and desires hidden inside the human soul).

The bonfire is prepared the day before and in the morning of February 3rd people gather at Gangōji to watch the big bonfire, tended to by *yamabushi*. Prayer tablets can be bought in advance or on the same day, and they will all be burnt later, according to the belief that Fudō Myōō will receive all the requests that have been cast into fire. *Yamabushi* (literally, “mountain sleepers”) are important characters on the stage of Japanese tradition, and during the *Saitō Ōgomaku* ritual they display their ability to control fire by allowing the flames to rise and then dousing them with water, so that huge billows of smoke would go high into the sky.

² Fieldwork conducted in February 2008 and February 2011.

According to Reverend Taizen Tsujimura³, the chief priest from Gangō-ji, this fire ceremony is both a kind of fire worship and a show for the benefit of the public. The fierce looking *yamabushi*, who traditionally lived as hermits in the mountains and descended into villages dressed in tattered clothes and animal skins, with long, unkempt hair, are no different from the *namahage* demons we are going to introduce in the next chapter, and fulfill a similar function: announcing the advent of spring. The Japanese say that “when the devils come down, the spring will come”, so *Saitō Ōgomaku* is a ceremony that invites spring, while at the same time purifying the participants’ spirits and sending forth their prayers for peace and happiness.

The climax of the ritual is the fire-walking ceremony. After the prayer tablets and the big logs of firewood have burnt almost to the ground, the *yamabushi* show yet another of their magical powers, namely that of walking on hot coals.



Yamabushi walking on fire

³ Interview conducted on March 4th, 2011.

However, during the fire-walking ritual they are not allowed to use water, so they replace it with salt, a substance which both attracts water and has purifying properties. Salt is sprinkled into the fire and is placed at the end of the fire path, so that the person who has crossed the fire would step into it and thus perform a double purification gesture. After the *yamabushi* cross the fire, when the coals have cooled enough, some of the spectators gathered in the temple precincts are allowed to imitate them and walk on fire – a symbolical gesture meant to prevent misfortune and heal diseases.

A similar event takes place on Mt Koya, the famous mountain region from Wakayama Prefecture known as the world headquarters of the Buddhist Shingon sect. Each year, on the first Sunday of March, *Hi Matsuri*⁴ (“Fire Festival”) is performed in an attempt to rush the coming of spring, prevent evil and invite good luck and “open the mountain”. The *yama-aki* (“mountain-opening”) ritual is connected to the coming of spring, as it indicates that the mountain path, until then inaccessible to people because of snow, have been cleared and can be used again. *Hi Matsuri* begins at noon, in front of Kongōbuji, where people gather to buy the prayer tablets that will be incinerated in the big bonfire, or simply to take part in the festive event, marked by various drum concerts. As in the case of the *Saitō Ōgomaku* from Gangōji, the *yamabushi* conduct the entire ceremony, showing their skills in controlling the fire. However, no fire-walking ritual

⁴ Fieldwork conducted in March 2007.

takes place here; after the big fire has burnt down, the participants queue to be blessed by the priests.



Hi Matsuri on Mt Koya

Wakayama Prefecture is the stage of one more *Hi Matsuri*, a festival held in summer, on July 14th, at Kumano Nachi Taisha. The Kumano mountains are an area designated as a World Heritage Site, and near the shrine there is a waterfall, Nachi-no-Otaki, which is regarded as a *goshintai* (a sacred object chosen by the gods as one of their sacred dwellings). The waterfall became an object of worship because, according to legend, the spirit of Ōkuninushi-no-kami descended and chose to stay there, following a request from Emperor Kammu.

On July 14th, each of the twelve gods (one for each month of the year) revered at Kumano Nachi Taisha are transferred into as many *mikoshi* (“ceremonial floats”) for their annual journey to the waterfall. The *mikoshi* are six meters tall and they are decorated with fans (*ōgi* in Japanese), that is why they are called *ōgi-mikoshi*. The twelve *mikoshi* are met on their way to the waterfall by twelve big torches (*taimatsu*), each weighing between fifty and sixty kilograms and having a diameter of fifty centimeters. The torches are supposed to light the way for the deities on their journey on the dark mountain path and, more importantly, to purify the realm they are about to enter. The ritual, like many of the Japanese *matsuri*, has a theatrical aspect as well, the climax of the ceremony being reached when the people carrying the *mikoshi* rush up the path, while those waving the torches hurry down from the mountain to meet them, among cries announcing strength and excitement.



Ōgi-mikoshi down the mountain path
and placed in front of the waterfall

After the deities have been carried to the top of the mountain, a priest performs the religious ritual in front of the one hundred thirty-three meter-tall Nachi-no-Otaki, a prayer meant to renew the divine spirit dwelling there and to restore it to its full powers. Besides the spectacular aspect of Nachi-no-hi-matsuri, the clear distinction that is made here between the sacred and the profane is noticeable. The valley is the regular world, the world of humans and unavoidable pollution. The deity, on the other hand, resides up in the mountains, continuously purified and revitalized by the waterfall, and the great *kami* can only be approached through a path of fire. The massive torches waved on the forest path fulfill several functions at the same time: they purify the way for the divinity, offer the carriers the opportunity to display strength and endurance, and offer entertainment to all the participants, be they descending gods, local worshippers, or mere tourists. On a symbolic level, they act as key to magical gates that open only once a year, to allow a glimpse of the divine realm within and to offer the participants a chance to send in their prayers and receive the blessings from beyond.

A different type of *Hi Matsuri* can be observed in Kyoto, at Iwakura Shrine⁵. Probably the best-known ritual involving fire in Kyoto is *Kurama Hi Matsuri*, yet the ceremony from Iwakura Shrine, performed for a much smaller audience, has an undeniable flavor of authenticity, and its origins remain quite obscure. One legend says that, a long time ago, people living around the shrine had been tormented by two huge

⁵ Fieldwork conducted in October 2008.

snakes, one male and one female. Not knowing what to do, they prayed to their god – Iwakura Ōkami, the the Great God of the Rock. Iwakura Ōkami appeared in the villagers' dreams and told them that fire was the only way to get rid of the snakes. People followed the deity's advice and made two big torches which they burnt in front of the shrines, thus banishing the snakes from their neighborhood forever. Two different beliefs can be noticed here: one is the ancient theme of fire worship, suggesting that fire should be offered to a deity, who will manifest itself through it; the other is related to the Japanese myth according to which fire can send a person or a god to the other world. By following Iwakura Ōkami's advice, his parishioners banish the snakes from their realm in a way that is similar to Izanami's disappearance from the human world.

Iwakura Hi-matsuri takes place in autumn, on the Saturday closest to October 23rd. Two impressive torches, representing the male and the female snake, are placed in advance on each side of the main altar, to be ritually lit a couple of hours after midnight. Before lighting the torches, the men who helped make them partake of a ritual meal around a fire, the entire setting being strongly suggestive of a fire-worship rite, especially since the weather is definitely not cold enough to require a fire. Fire is set to the torches at around 2:30 a.m. on Saturday, amid the participants' loud cheering, and the torches are carefully watched until the fires burn down at around 6 o'clock in the morning. When only glowing embers are left, the men take the *mikoshi* from the

altar and carry the god to its “visiting place”, not far from Iwakura Shrine, from where it will be returned to the shrine around noon the same day.



The fire festival at Iwakura Shrine

The *Hi Matsuri* at Iwakura Shrine does not include any forms of entertainment, as it is often the case with other *matsuri*, because the focus is on the magical practice of keeping the fire burning all night as protection against evil.

Fire magic at work can be observed during another festive event occurring later in the year, on December 14th, at Iwatsuta Shrine⁶, in Sakai, south of Osaka. The god worshipped at Iwatsuta Shrine is one of the more interesting figures of Japanese mythology, the god Hiruko. Hiruko (his

⁶ Fieldwork conducted in December 2007~2018.

name has often been translated as “leech child”) was the first offspring of the primordial couple Izanagi and Izanami. However, during their marriage ritual, after descending from heaven and going around the Heavenly Pillar, the goddess Izanami spoke first in invitation and the child born from her union with Izanagi could not use his feet. The gods saw this as a mistaken ritual, as it was not for the female to speak first, and they decided to cast away their failed creation, the result of Izanami’s hubris. Hiruko, like Moses, was put in a reed basket and cast into the water. Nevertheless, it was precisely his unlucky birth that seemed to ensure Hiruko’s destiny as a god of good luck. In later stories, Hiruko turned into Ebisu, a maritime deity and one of the seven Gods of Good Luck.

According to the legend recorded at Iwatsuta Shrine, Hiruko drifted to the shores near the shrine, where some fishermen found him almost frozen to death. To warm him up, they used one hundred and eight bundles of wood, nowadays represented by a big bonfire. The event is re-enacted on the evening of December 14th, under the name of “Yassai Hossai” – the interjection shouted by the men who cross the fire. The ritual itself is relatively short: like during most *Hi Matsuri*, the greater part of the celebration is spent watching the high flames, the ancestral feelings of awe and fear towards the overwhelming powers of fire being temporarily remembered. When the burning logs have turned into hot coal, men wearing only white cotton trousers and high cotton belts carry Hiruko three times across the fire.



The God Hiruko being carried across the fire (2007 & 2018)

After that, anybody who is willing may attempt walking on the glowing embers (wearing shoes), although the act implies more danger than fire-walking at Gangōji, as the coals are still burning hot and sparks fly high as people run through the fire. Nowadays, the fire-crossing gesture is viewed as a purification act, since it is believed that all evils and diseases afflicting the human body are burnt away, and those who can complete the ritual acquire a kind of magic immunity against

illness and bad luck. Hiruko's presence, however, indicates a deeper meaning: Hiruko represents the "small individual", to borrow Yanagita Kunio's phrase, who is destined to accomplish great acts. He is twice purified: once through water and once through fire, and goes twice on a journey to the other world. In this respect, his passage from one world to another is the opposite of those made by his divine parents. Izanami passes to the world of shadows through fire and Izanagi returns to the human world through water purification. Hiruko, on the contrary, leaves the divine world and faces death when he is set adrift in a reed boat (that is, through water) and returns to the world of the living through the blessing warmth of fire.

Water

The connection between fire and water as purification means and ways into the sacred is deep and intricate, and in many Japanese rituals we can observe the usage of both, for similar purposes. For example, during the *Tsuina-shiki*⁷ (a ceremony performed on *Setsubun* day) at Nagata Shrine in Kobe, the men who will play the demon roles gather on the seashore early in the morning and purify themselves by bathing in seawater.

I have already remarked upon the importance of seawater in Shinto rituals; the significant element here is that the men purify themselves in their human quality. They have been chosen to play the demon parts during the *Setsubun*,

⁷ Fieldwork conducted in February 2011 and 2012.

and they may not approach the sacred while tainted by their human passions and weaknesses. Bathing in ice-cold seawater on a February morning represents an act of asceticism related to the *yamabushi* practices and the single way to approach the sacred. The purification ritual on the seashore is merely the first step towards complete purification; the next is taken when the men perform *suigyō* (“purification through water”) within the shrine precincts, this time using water from the shrine well.



Ritual ablutions on Suma Beach,
Kobe, and inside Nagata Shrine

Only when these quite painful preparations have been completed can the men enter the *oni mura* (“demon chamber”) and don the costumes that turn them into deities, namely, good demons who descend among people to ward off calamities and epidemics. When they leave the *oni mura*, wearing the demon masks, the air in front of them is purified with burning straw torches, a suggestive gesture clearly showing that water cleanses and prepares the protagonist of the ritual, while fire actually opens the door to the other world.





Leaving the *oni mura*

A similar combination of fire and water as main instruments of a ritual can be observed during *Sominsai*⁸, an event celebrated in February at the Kokusekiji, in Oshū City, Iwate Prefecture. *Sominsai* is widely known as a type of *Hadaka-matsuri* (“nakedness festival”), but this over one-thousand-year-old tradition has deeper meanings and multiple aspects. Although the actual event takes place in February, the preparations begin on December 13th of the

⁸ Fieldwork conducted in February 2009.

previous year, when the temple's parishioners go to gather wood for the *otachiki* ("standing wood"), a big round bonfire supported by forty or fifty logs tied together with a rope, so that the entire arrangement resembles a giant *kadomatsu* ("New Year decoration"). This has led to the interpreting of the *otachiki* as an actual *kadomatsu*, or *yorishiro*⁹. However, the parishioners see it as an offering to the temple, a belief which seems to support the idea of fire worship. Despite its sacred nature, the *otachiki* undergoes further purification by being sprinkled with salt. After the bonfire has been prepared, most of the participants' actions leading to the festival night are in one way or another related to the ritual, namely, they share a symbolic meal on New Year's Day and they purify themselves by bathing in the frozen waters of the Ruritsubo River, in a ritual called *mizugori* ("purifying oneself with cold water"). *Kori* is a term meaning to offer prayers by mortifying one's body with cold water, and, as it can be observed from the rituals discussed above, purification through water in Japanese culture is more than a symbolical sprinkling of water during a ceremony, as it often involves rather severe ascetic practices. In many cases, these practices have come to be associated with Buddhism, but that does not mean that they represent exclusively the Buddhist tradition; on the contrary, it can be said that Japanese Buddhism borrowed these practices from the indigenous tradition, where they have deeper roots.

⁹ The term *yorishiro* indicates a sacred object (a paper strip, a sand mound, a tree, etc.), designated as a temporary descending place for deities.

Those who take part in *Sominsai* continue a strict purification regimen involving ritual ablutions and fasting, necessary during their labors towards preparing the ritual objects. Kneading the “mandala rice”, glutinous rice from which figurines in the shape of the twelve zodiac signs will be made as offerings to the deities, putting together the torches that will be used during *Sominsai*, or making the *komagi* – wooden amulets shaped like six-faceted wands. The role of salt and water as means of entering the sacred – reminiscent of sea water – is again obvious, as the women who weave the *somin bukuro* (the hemp bags containing the *komagi*) first purify themselves with hot water to which they added salt. The *komagi* are amulets designed to protect against evil and plagues, the characters *Somin Shōrai shison* (“the descendants of Somin Shōrai”) being inscribed upon it. The explanation, as well as the origin of the event as a whole, lie in the following legend. The Heavenly Deity called Mutō (in the Kokusekiji records, the name appears as Takeaki-kami) started on a journey to find a wife near the South Sea. As night was near, he decided to look for shelter in a nearby village, where two brothers named Kotan Shōrai and Somin Shōrai lived. Somin was very poor, while Kotan was extremely rich. However, the rich brother refused to offer shelter to the deity, while the poor brother treated him with the utmost kindness. The god left in the morning, but years later eight princes returned to the village, inquiring after the descendants of Somin Shōrai. They found just one granddaughter and advised her to wear around her waist a wreath made of entwined reeds. During

the night, all the people in the village were killed, except the Somin Shōrai's granddaughter, who received further advice from one *kami*. The divinity who asked for shelter and who revealed himself as Susano-wo-no-mikoto told the girl that from then on, when a plague was upon the village, she and her children should make similar wreaths and proclaim loudly "We are the descendants of Somin Shōrai", this being a sure way to escape disease (*Fudoki*).

Thus, one of the purposes of *Sominsai* is to ward off disease, that is why the first stage of the event involves men and women who are of the *yakudoshi* ("inauspicious age"): 25, 42 and 61 for men, 19, 33, 37 for women. On the first Saturday of February, at 10 o'clock in the evening, men and women who have reached or will reach one these inauspicious ages during that year go toward the Ruritsubo River carrying paper lanterns. The men wear only the traditional Japanese underwear *fundoshi*, and they perform the purification ritual in the half-frozen water of the river. The ritual itself is called *hadaka-mairi* ("the naked procession"), or *natsu-mairi* ("the summer procession", an allusion to the fact that the participants are naked, despite the bitter winter cold) and it represents a form of prayer for a good year, devoid of calamities and disease.

Once the ablutions are completed, the participants head back towards the temple, where, at around 11:30 at night, the *hitaki-nobori* ("climbing the bonfire") is performed. This next ritual gesture consists of the same men who bathed in the cold water now climbing on the burning bonfire erected in

front of the main hall, and attempting to stand on the hot logs for as long as possible. Again, one witnesses a kind of transcendence between realms facilitated by these two ascetic practices. The participants have eliminated all traces of human impurities from their bodies through immersion in the cold water, and now they can cross the border between the worlds using a bridge of fire.



Mizugori and hitachi-nobori at Kokusekiji

The climax of the event is reached at around 5 o'clock in the morning, when the naked participants climb the wooden pillars in front of the main hall and try to collect as many *komagi* as possible, as the *somin bukuro* will be ritually cut and the wooden amulets spread in front of the temple's main hall. Although this is the most eagerly expected moment of the celebration, ritually speaking it marks a return to normality, to the human world. The participants, who had the chance to partake of the sacred through their contact with the fire and water, now regain their mortal status while fighting for amulets representing the goodwill of the real deities.

A related event, called *Hadaka-matsuri*¹⁰ ("the nakedness festival") can be observed at the Saidaiji in Okayama, on the third Saturday of February. The official name of the ritual is *Eyō* and it was established 500 years ago in direct relationship with the *Shushō-e* ceremony from Tōdaiji in Nara. The records from Saidaiji mention that in 1510, the priest Chūa distributed wooden amulets from Tōdaiji to his parishioners by throwing them in the air. As the amulets were regarded as particularly efficient against all kinds of evil, the parishioners fought to catch them and even discarded their clothes in order to be able to move more freely. The ritual has continued to this day, the wooden amulets (called *shingi*, yet similar to the *komagi* distributed at Kokusekiji) being thrown by a priest from a high window into a mass of practically naked bodies eagerly awaiting the shower of good luck charms.

¹⁰ Fieldwork conducted in February 2011.

Eyō also involves lengthy preparations, which usually begin two weeks before the actual event, when priests gather at Saidaiji to purify their bodies and spirits, and to offer daily prayers for peace, safety, bountiful crops and happiness of the people. Contact with any kind of pollution is strictly forbidden, which means that if death occurs in the family of one of the parishioners, a priest who does not take part in the ritual will be asked to perform the necessary funerary rites. In this respect, *Eyō* is closer in structure and ritual observance to the *Shuni-e* from Tōdaiji than to *Sominsai*, the former being entirely conducted by priests, while during the latter the priest's role is not particularly emphasized, the villagers acting as main protagonists both during the preparations and during the festival itself.

Anybody, not only local people, is welcome to participate in the *Hadaka-matsuri*, with the condition they abstain from alcohol consumption – a rule which is related to public order rather than tradition, seeing that traditionally alcohol consumption was a given during festivals, performed both for personal pleasure and as a kind of offering to the gods. At around 8 o'clock in the evening the purification ceremony begins. The participants, wearing only *fundoshi*, come in groups to perform ablutions in a pool of sacred water built inside the temple precincts. An interesting element here is the presence of women in the purification ceremony; although they do not take part in the *hon-oshi* (the fight for catching the *shingi*), some of the female parishioners choose to perform the purification ceremony, which is said to have beneficial effects

on the body and spirit. When they have finished, men come in groups and jump in the pool, whose entrance is marked by a *torii* (the sacred Shinto gate) and in whose middle there is a statue of the Goddess of Mercy, Kannon.



Kori - the ritual purification

In the ceremonies and rituals discussed above, one cannot but notice that the Buddhist ceremonies involving fire are focused around the deity Fudō Myōō, traditionally described as surrounded by flames, while those involving water are a form of prayer to either Yakushi Nyōrai (the men who play the demon roles during the *Tsuina-shiki* at Nagata-jinja will pray to Yakushi Nyōrai after their seawater ablutions; while the main deity worshipped at Kokuseki-ji is the same Yakushi Nyōrai) or the deity Kannon (at Saidai-ji or Tōdai-ji). Yakushi Nyōrai (Bhaiṣajyagurubuddha in Sanskrit) is the Buddha of Medicine, his association with water probably coming from the belief that water can cure disease and wash away evil, especially in Japan, where hot springs with curative powers were not unusual. In fact, that is why statues of Yakushi Nyōrai are often seen in hot spring resorts.

The relationship between Kannon (Avalokiteśvara in Sanskrit) and water is less obvious, although the deity, commonly represented as female in Japan, often stands in a pool of sacred water, as it is the case at Saidaiji or Tōdaiji. When the cult of Avalokiteśvara was developed, this particular bodhisattva was seen as a deity who protects both against fire and floods, leading the souls towards eternal liberation. It is thus easy to assume that Avalokiteśvara was considered as able to control water, using its benefic powers to bless the believers. At the same time, water, an element which already held a high significance within Japanese indigenous beliefs, turned into a medium for essence transfer: the deity could share its divine essence through water, while *kori* (“purification through water”) helped the practitioner to approach the divine.

One of the most complex rituals that involve both fire and water is the *Shuni-e* from the Tōdaiji in Nara. The *Shuni-e* is also known as *Omizutori*¹¹ (“water-drawing”) and it has been performed every year, without interruption, since 752, the year when the statue of the Great Buddha was installed at Tōdaiji. The main rituals extend over a period of fourteen days, from March 1st to March 14th, although until Meiji Period, *Shuni-e* took place from the 1st until the 14th day of the second month according to the lunar calendar. Similar to many other Japanese festivals and rituals that are conducted in the beginning of spring, *Shuni-e* represents an occasion to pray for a peaceful and bountiful year; at the same time, it is an occasion to repent for all the evil doings of the past year and purify one’s body and soul.

Eleven monks, known as *rengyōshū* (“those who make a sustained effort”, in this particular case - perform ascetic practices) are selected to participate in the ritual and their roles are announced on December 16th of the previous year. Although the priests gather at Tōdaiji earlier in February, on March 1st they enter the sacred precincts of Nigatsudō (one of the temples from the Tōdaiji complex), making a vow of penitence to Kannon, and begin the *hongyō* (“main ceremony”). They undertake the task of performing penitence on behalf of the humankind, for all possible sins, and pray for peace and happiness. The *Shuni-e*, with all the rituals preceding it and those concentrated during the main fourteen days, is a vast event with multiple meanings, but it is not my

¹¹ Fieldwork conducted in February~March 2010, 2011.

aim here to offer a detailed analysis of each element. *Omizutori*, as it is popularly known, has become increasingly famous during the last two or three hundred years, due to the performance of the huge torches (*taimatsu*) that are waived from the balcony of Nigatsudō towards the crowds gathered below. The ashes and cinders from those torches are seen as having magical properties, and those who are touched by them feel blessed. However, although fueled by a pre-existent belief, the practice of the giant torches is a relatively new addition to the ceremony, dating from the Edo Period, when the priests made an effort to attract more believers. That is why, albeit undeniably spectacular, the famous torches from Tōdaiji do not represent the essence of the *Omizutori* ritual.



Torches lighting the priests' passage at Nigatsudō (March 2012)

The ritual itself was established by a monk from Tōdaiji, named Jitchū, and it includes numerous practices related to asceticism and mortification of the body: fasting, repentance six times a day, chanting of sutras and other practices that require a fair amount of physical training. Related to this, Chief Abbot Dozen Ueno from Tōdaiji remarked in an interview from 2008: “The *Shuni-e* ceremony involves a lot of active movement, and the *rengyōshū* need to have a good deal of physical strength. But even the ‘running ceremony’ (*hashiri*), where you run through the Nigatsu Hall in the middle of the night, or the *gotai-tochi*, where you jump up and strike your right knee with a judo-like motion, has a formal beauty that is distinctively Japanese. The recitation of sutra passages has a sense of rhythm, a tempo, and makes me think that Jitchū must have had a great theatrical mind to compose such an intricate drama of prayer.” (Emoto 2008)

The fact that the ritual itself contains theatrical elements is not surprising, because any sacred manifestation is also a form of entertainment, be it for the sake of the participants or for that of the deities to whom it is dedicated. Nevertheless, the principles underlying the *Shuni-e* have deep roots in the Japanese tradition and are connected to relevant beliefs about the life-giving water and the purifying fire. For example, before *hongyō* begins, another ritual, named *bekka* (“separate fire”) is performed, marking the fact that the monks and priests will begin a lifestyle that does not include the fire from the profane world. Once they enter the sacred precincts, they will only use the fire they created themselves, with a pure flint. The priests who participate for the first time

in the *Shuni-e* will enter the *bekka* hall on February 15th, while the veterans will join them on February 20th. The days until March 1st are seen as a kind of preparation for the life in the most sacred space of all, and minor taboos may still be broken (mostly those related to food and drink), but fire from the outside world can by no means be used. When the priests leave the *bekka* space to enter the *sōbekka*, where all the rituals will be conducted, they leave behind the remains of the sacred fire, named *sutebi* (“discarded fire”), which can be shared with the visitors, who believe in its magical and purifying properties. Yet, for the priests this fire is not pure enough and they may not come in contact with it. On March 1st, when the priests enter the *sōbekka*, at around 2:15 in the morning, in the complete darkness of the night, one of the priests lights the first fire, called *ittokubi*, from which all fires in the hall will be lit for the duration of the ceremony.

The special care and attention that surround the making and usage of fire indicate the importance it holds. During a ritual that announces the coming of spring, thus indicating renewal and rebirth, only a type of fire connected to the primordial times, a fire from the beginning of time can be summoned and used. The fire lit within the *sōbekka* is more than a ritual instrument and a daily life tool, it symbolizes a profound connection with the original creation and original purity, which are to be re-created through prayer, penitence, and, why not, magic practices.

A variety of torches are used during the fourteen days of confinement and prayer, the ones most known to the ordinary people being the *taimatsu* – torches which are

between 6 and 8 meters long, weighing about forty kilograms each. These torches were originally used as light for the priests who walked the covered pathways of Nigatsudō, having acquired in time a symbolical value.

Nowadays, ten torches are burned every day from March 1st to March 11th, and they have become emblematic for the *Shuni-e*. On March 12th, the evening before the *Omizutori* ceremony, eleven torches, each weighing about seventy kilograms, are burnt, in an impressive display of skill and dedication to the preservation of this tradition. To quote Chief Abbot Dozen Ueno again, “water and fire both have fundamental religious significance: flames consume gross human desires, while pure water cleanses the body and soul. The ritual, performed in the middle of the night from March 12 through 14, uses special torches called *dattan* that are waved with a dancelike motion to burn our gross desires away.” (Emoto)

A pattern of thought similar to the worship of Fudō Myōō can be identified here— fire burns the invisible pollution, that which is hidden in the depths of the human soul. Fire also is a carrier of prayers, sometimes accompanied by written tablets that will be consumed by the flames during the *goma-taki* ceremony, and sometimes accompanied by deep penitence and the offering of a human body’s pain. The fact that purification ceremonies through fire or water usually involve a certain degree of pain is significant. In the rituals described above, the participants walked on hot coals, crossed a still burning fire, bathed in the winter sea or the

almost frozen waters of a river. The *rengyōshū* emphasize their commitment to repentance, through equally toll-taking practices, such as *hashiri* (running around the main altar at an increasingly high speed during the night), *tsure-gotai* (using one's arms to hang suspended from a wooden grid, a remarkably painful exercise) or *gotai-tochi* (throwing one's body to the ground in an act of ritual penitence). Although less visible to the public, as its name indicates, water is at the center of *Omizutori* ceremony. During *hongyō*, the priests perform daily ablutions (*o-suigyō*) with water from the Ebisu River, in which they dip bamboo leaves with which they sprinkle the pure drops on their heads.

The chief abbot succinctly explains the importance of water: "The *Shuni-e* is also known as the *Omizutori*, or water-drawing, and as this name implies, water is drawn from the Nigatsu Hall's well and offered to Kannon-san in the middle of the night on March 12. The traditional belief in Japan is that the cold water of winter is full of vital energy and will not go stale, and this must have led to its use in the ritual penitence, where we wash away our defilement." (Emoto) The *Omizutori* ceremony may have its origins in the Japanese concept of *wakamizu* ("young water"), meaning water that was ritually drawn in a ritual marking the spring equinox and the beginning of the new agricultural year. The "young water" was thought to have magical properties: purifying the body and spirit, protecting against diseases and extending one's life span. At Nigatsudō, *Omizutori* is performed during the night of March 12th towards March 13th, at around 2 o'clock in the

morning, when the priests draw water from the Akainoya well situated at the base of the temple. *Omizutori* is a strictly secret ritual, and only two priests, the one fulfilling the role of *shushi* (literally, the “magician”, in other words, the priest in charge of conducting the esoteric *Omizutori* ritual) and the one acting as *dōdōshi* (“protector of the ritual hall”).

The drawn water, called *kōsui* (“fragrant water”) is placed on the *shumidan* (“main altar” in a Buddhist temple) as an offering and it will be used during the entire year for various rituals. The “fragrant water” is regarded as particularly potent in curing diseases, that is why the believers gathered in huge numbers at the temple (it is said that over two million people attended the ceremony in 2011) wait to receive scoops of the sacred water.

Conclusions

One may argue that in contemporary society religion has lost the importance and authority it used to have, becoming a mere show or a different kind of bedtime story. The rituals which are still performed every year (more than this, every month of every year) in Japan prove otherwise: some beliefs are deeply rooted in the soul of the community and they lie at the foundation of all the time and money consuming ceremonies that are organized to celebrate deities, to pray for happiness and safety, and to acquire magical means of protection against evil. Modern psychology emphasizes the importance of positive thinking as a means of

success at any level. Likewise, we can see the believers' desire to purify themselves with holy ashes, or sacred salt, or "fragrant young water" as another type of positive thinking. Belief, if not necessary the water, fire or salt themselves, will make some of the wishes come true, while attending the sacred rituals will contribute to the psychological regeneration (soul-renewal) of the participants.

"Purification" is a term often used in connection to Japanese ritual practices, but salt, fire, and water can have functions that go beyond this initial stage of interpretation: salt has magical properties that ward off demons and provide passage to another realm, water and fire are used as tools for people to display strength and control over their bodies, which sometimes they offer to the gods as the highest form of sacrifice. It appears that in Japan, the rich symbolism of these elements (based on a universal pattern), and the ancient beliefs and esoteric rituals often turn into festive occasions for the community as a whole. Individual faith aside, the manner in which the rites discussed here are conducted indicates that ritual practices and daily rituals often overlap in contemporary society, fulfilling an indispensable role in establishing order and giving meaning to daily life.

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Peaches, Dolls, and Irises: Children's Rites of Passage

"I understand why we invented God and why cling to him with both hands - because we're the only species on the planet that's aware it's going to die." (Carolla 2010: 144) A quote from a comedian might seem out of place in the context of an academic paper, but anthropologically speaking it is extremely relevant, as a reflection of the shift in common mentality, perspective, acceptance and freedom of the individual. Religion has lost much of its society-regulating role, as well as its power of controlling people's lives, which means that getting away from the religious tradition while preserving another kind of ritual has become commonplace in contemporary society. The present paper focuses on the rituals and ceremonies marking each essential step in the life of an individual from the moment of conception to the passing into adulthood, and my analysis, while not exhaustive, will show how, although the connection with religion has been essentially altered, the ritual is a living and flourishing organism.

1. Conception and birth

A child's importance not only for the family, but also for the community whose new member he or she will become is apparent in the customs and traditions surrounding the conception, birth and all the significant stages that follow. Even before conception, various practices connect the extraordinary world of sacred rituals to the ordinary daily life, when women believe that they need some extra (magical) help in getting pregnant. One such instance can be observed during Onda Matsuri¹ from Imasu Asuka Shrine, in Nara, a *matsuri* conducted yearly on the first Sunday in February. Although it is mainly a festival for the fertility of the fields and rich rice crops, at the end, after a mock sexual act is performed on stage by two men wearing the masks of *tengu* (a demon with the nose suggestively shaped like a phallus) and *otafuku* (woman), the *tengu* will symbolically wipe the *otafuku*'s genitalia with rice paper, which he will then throw to the crowd. Although obviously clean, the paper is supposed to contain *kodakara* ("the treasure of children"), a sacred semen which will help women get pregnant. At Awashima Shrine (more about this shrine on the section on Hina Matsuri), women bring their underwear as offerings (clean but worn at least once, tied up in a small bag) to the local goddess, hoping to be cured of various female specific afflictions, or to be blessed with children, and the shrine also sells underwear that supposedly enhance fertility.

¹ Fieldwork conducted in 2005 and 2017.



Sharing the *kodakara* with the participants



Fertility underwear from Awashima Shrine

Although not yet born, the child turns into a real presence within the community from the moment pregnancy is announced. In the old times, the maternal grandmother would go around the village with small presents of ritual food (rice and fish), to inform the neighbors and acquaintances of the blessing that had been bestowed on her daughter. Also, in some cases, a simple meal would be offered to well-wishers

who visit the house of the future mother. While this custom may not be so common nowadays, especially in big cities, it is true that families still make a celebration, however small, of the moment when a pregnancy is announced.

A further step towards integrating the new life within the community is another way of making the pregnancy public: *Obi iwai*, the symbolic moment when the pregnant woman wraps a special girdle around her waist, thus visibly proclaiming her condition and acquiring magical protection for her fetus, as well as ensuring a safe and easy birth. *Obi iwai* (literally – “girdle celebration”, but the name differs from area to area, other common expressions being *obi kake* – “putting on the girdle”, *obi morai* – “receiving the girdle,” or *obi mawashi* – “wrapping the girdle”) takes place during the fifth month or the seventh month of pregnancy, on the day of the Dog, as female dogs are supposed to have easy labours.

Kunio Yanagita (206) describes an interesting custom performed both as a way of celebrating the pregnancy, and of predicting the sex of the baby. In some villages from the Gifu Prefecture, the future parents receive a gift of red and white rice cakes, each cake containing two soybeans. If they split the beans when cutting the rice cake, the baby will be a girl; if the beans remain intact, the baby will be a boy. However, this custom is limited to the firstborn, thus emphasizing the high status of the oldest child in traditional societies.

The ritual practices surrounding the actual birth focus more on the mother (and all the taboos related to blood pollution) than on the child; until after the Second World War,

rural communities still had special huts called *ubuya*, where pregnant women would retire to give birth and where they would stay for up to several weeks following the birth, in order to avoid contaminating the community with their bodies defiled by blood and pain. These birthing huts (first recorded in writing in 712, in *Kojiki*, the oldest Japanese chronicle, where the creator god Izanagi proclaims that he will build 1,500 birthing huts daily, to compensate for the 1,000 souls his enraged spouse Izanami threatens to kill everyday - *Kojiki*: 49) were usually built outside the village and as far as possible from the village shrine. However, Tōru Yagi (8-11) mentions that in Fukuchiyama (Kyoto Prefecture), the *ubuya* was built in close proximity to Ōbara Shrine, with the entrance actually facing the shrine. Yagi explains this paradox as a way to present, even before the formal ceremony that will follow, the child to the local god, praying for its and its mother's health and wellbeing. His interpretation is most likely accurate, as many of the ceremonies and rituals that mark various stages in a child's life involve interacting (at a symbolical level, of course) with the local god.

2. The First Three Years

The first major ceremony in the life of a child is its first visit to the Shinto shrine, event which can take place 21, 30, 75 or 100 days after birth and which is an occasion to "introduce" the child to the local deity. The reason for a lack of coherence regarding the actual day when a child should be

taken to the shrine for the first time can be found in the various beliefs that underlie this custom: the ceremony may be performed earlier due to the wish of relieving the child of the birth impurity taboo, or it may be performed later due to the opposite reason, namely, a breastfed child still shares the impurity taboo with the mother, so they should visit the shrine together, at the end of the taboo period. Another explanation can be found in the belief that the hundredth day is the day to visit the Birth Protecting God. Yanagita also believes that originally this first visit to the shrine took place 100 days after birth, this being an important day as it coincided with the period when the baby started eating solid food (this ritual meal is called *kui hajime*, “beginning to eat”). On this day, a small stone was placed on the baby’s food tray, in an act of imitative magic whose purpose was to bless the child with good strong teeth (227). The photo² below shows a contemporary *kui hajime* set, including red rice with adzuki beans, sea bream (called *tai* in Japanese and eaten on festive days because of its similarity to the word *medatai*, meaning “happy”, “joyous”), and a glutinous rice cake (*mochi*), all foods usually cooked for celebratory occasions.

The first visit to the shrine is called *Miya mairi*, *Hatsumiya mōde* or *Momoka* in some areas, and it is one of the many symbolical gestures meant to turn the child into a full-fledged member of the community. On this day, the child and his mother are considered pure enough to step on the sacred grounds, where the baby will be acknowledged as a

² Photos courtesy of Mrs. Tomoko Koyama.

parishioner by the local priest, from whom he or she will receive a wooden prayer tablet. Being a celebratory occasion, members of the family offer gifts for the baby; in contemporary society, the gifts are usually money placed in a beautifully decorated envelope.



Kui hajime with the maternal grandmother
and great-grandmother



Baby boy after his *Miya mairi*, with the money envelopes attached to the traditional robe³

Since *Miya mairi* represents a formal announcement of the baby's existence to the protecting deity, the baby must be induced to cry – in the old times, this was easily done by lightly slapping or pinching the child; the newer psychological guidelines force parents to simply wait until the baby starts crying naturally, usually from hunger or fatigue –to make its presence known to the gods. This custom, although performed individually, is closely related to the Nakizumō (“crying sumo”) Matsuri, which is spread in various regions of Japan, and where two toddlers, both boys and girls, are

³ Photo courtesy of Ms. Kikuko Sano.

involved in a mock sumo competition. Children under the age of two are allowed to participate, being held by sumo wrestlers until they begin to cry, the child who cries first being deemed the winner and a sign of good luck and prosperity for its family.



Nakizumō at Chōkōji Temple, Shizuoka Prefecture⁴

During Nakizumō, crying is an auspicious gesture and, as in the case of the first visit to the shrine, a way of communicating with the gods and asking for their blessings in a special, magical language. It is considered that the harder a child cries during *Miya mairi*, the stronger it will grow and the happier its life will be.

⁴ Fieldwork conducted in May 2005.

Also associated with fertility rites and, in some cases, ritual crying is Hina Matsuri, commonly known in English as the Doll Festival. Nowadays, Hina Matsuri is widely celebrated on March 3rd (although the dates differ according to the area and the main significance of the ritual), being generally viewed as the Girls' Day. Immediately after *Setsubun*⁵, families with girls take out and set doll arrangements that range from seven-tiered gorgeous doll displays to simple miniature decorations such as two symbolic dolls made of glass, ceramic or colored paper.



Traditional doll displays from the Omihachiman City Museum
(Shiga Prefecture), February 2017

⁵ February 3rd, the day marking the New Year according to the lunar calendar, when various rituals and prayers are performed. *Setsubun* is considered to mark the end of winter and beginning of spring.

Typically, such a doll setting includes a central pair called *dairi-bina*, representing the emperor and the empress, who are often accompanied by *sannin kanjo* (“three Court ladies”) and *gonin bayashi* (“five musicians”). Fresh or artificial sprigs of peach blossoms, offerings of sweet *sake* and diamond-shaped rice cakes complete the display, although more lavish settings may include more dolls and various accessories, such as miniature pieces of furniture, chests of clothes, carriages, kitchens and hearths. This festival is widely spread in contemporary Japan, and from February until April, in various locations around the country, exquisite doll exhibitions are held, together with the more traditional rituals performed during the Hina Matsuri. Little girls receive *hina* doll gifts on their first Hina Matsuri, and similar gifts are sent to families who have a new daughter-in-law.

An interesting custom can still be observed in most parts of Japan: on a girl’s first Hina Matsuri, a big *mochi* weighing up to two kilograms is made, wrapped in a piece of silk and tied to the little girl’s back. The cake is called *tanjō mochi* (“birthday mochi”) or *seoi mochi* (“mochi to be carried on the back”) and the custom has various interpretations. According to some, making a child who has barely started walking carry such a heavy weight means getting the child accustomed to the hardships she will have to face in the future. Another interpretation is that the oversized cake is a symbol of plenty: the girl will never suffer from hunger her entire life. The fact that the little girl will definitely stumble and fall under the weight on her back is associated to the

belief that girls usually leave their parents when they grow up, but the rice cake will symbolically tie them to and make them return to their home and family.



Little girl struggling to lift the heavy *mochi*⁶

The dolls that can be seen during Hina Matsuri are commonly represented in attire specific to the Heian period, and that is why it is often thought that the custom of displaying dolls on March 3rd began in the 8th or 9th century, yet the first records of such a practice appear only in the 17th century, during the Edo period. That does not mean, however, that the dolls do not have a longer history within the Japanese culture. The word *hina* is thought to have meant “small thing”, that is, a miniature representation of something else. In the case of dolls, they were actually representations of human beings and, under the name *hitogata*, were used in

⁶ Photo courtesy of Mrs. Junko Kanayama.

purification rituals, when all impurities, diseases and misfortune were transferred upon dolls, which were then cast away into the sea or rivers.



Floating dolls at Shimogamo Shrine, Kyoto⁷

The practice is mentioned in the old Japanese chronicles as a method of cleansing oneself and getting rid not only of impurities, but also of one's sins, and we can assume that at some point in history there was a shift from real human victims to human-shaped dolls. Sacrifice by drowning is a fertility ritual encountered in many cultures of the world. If we look at the Mexican cenotes (to give just an example) – ritual pools created nearby temples, where human victims

⁷ Fieldwork conducted in March 2006, September 2010, March 2017 and 2019.

were drowned during religious ceremonies – it becomes clear that in Japan, as anywhere else, it was originally human beings who were sacrificed by drowning, their place being taken in later times by dolls which resembled a human body.

In modern times, the *hina nagashi* (“the casting of dolls into water”) is performed at various shrines and temples across the country, one of the most famous ceremonies being held at Awashima Shrine, in Wakayama Prefecture. The shrine is known because the deities Sukunahikona-no-mikoto, the God of Medicine, and Okinagatarashi-hime-no-mikoto are supposed to cure female ailments and infertility. The goddess Okinagatarashi-hime-no-mikoto, who was the consort of Sumiyoshi Myōjin, became afflicted with a female disease and was exiled to Awashima, where she vowed to cure all women who came to pray there. Awashima Shrine is the place where *hina* dolls from all over the country are collected before March 3rd, when they are put in three wooden boats and let drift into the sea.

The ceremony begins at noon, when the priest performs the ritual purification, after which the three boats containing the dolls are carried to the shore by women only. Any female participant in the festival is welcome to join in carrying the boat for a certain length of time, as long as they respect the silence taboo – while shouldering the boats, speaking is strictly forbidden. An explanation of this taboo may be the fact that the dolls are not mere old toys to be discarded, but they also represent sacrificial victims who acquire a divine status. In all cultures, the sacrificial victim becomes a

messenger to the gods, closer to the sacred than any other participant in the ritual, and thus a character to be revered and worshipped. Once the boats reach the shore, another short purification ritual is performed and then the dolls are cast into the sea.



Dolls in the main hall of Awashima Shrine



Carrying the dolls to the sea



Bidding farewell to the dolls

In the old times, apparently children were supposed to weep while bidding their farewell to the dolls, thus emphasizing once more their divine status, but nowadays the weeping has been replaced with a song performed by girls from the local kindergarten⁸. The ritual significance of this ceremony becomes evident if we consider the fact that not

⁸ Fieldwork conducted in February-March 2006, September 2010, March 2013, and March 2019.

only the floating dolls, but also the dolls from the house displays are viewed as a link with the sacred world; they are often seen as *yorishiro* - the temporary abode of the gods who descend to bless the house and the girls within.

The Hina Matsuri itself represents a unique celebration of fertility, that which is budding both in the recently awakened nature and in the little girls, symbolized by the peach blossoms; it is an occasion to renew the bonds with the natural world and to have yet another glimpse into the sacred, through the ephemeral gate opened by the floating dolls.

The counterpart of Hina Matsuri is *Kodomo-no-hi* ("the Boys' Festival"), celebrated on May 5th. Although the rituals surrounding this particular ceremony are less intricate than those performed at Hina Matsuri, the decorations are no less lavish and spectacular. This is an occasion to pray for the boys' health, safety and happiness, the traditional house displays including miniature armors, dolls and carps.





Decorative plates representing the fairytale hero Kintarō
(the author's personal collection)



Kodomo-no-hi altar, together with its beneficiaries⁹

⁹ Photo courtesy of Ms. Kikuko Sano.

This day is also known as *Tango-no-sekku*, being one of the five *sekku* (“seasonal holidays”) officially established during the Tokugawa Shogunate. On this day, besides displaying warrior dolls, families with boys would set up flying-carp streamers, while the boys themselves would participate in *kurabe uma* (“horse racing”), *yabusame* (“horseback archery competitions”) or they would fly kites. Customs still practiced today are eating *Kashiwa mochi* (“rice cakes wrapped in oak leaves”) and taking baths in water steeped with irises.



Yabusame at Kamigamo Shrine (Kyoto, May 2011)

The carp streamers, called *koinobori*, are well known and their origin lies in a legend according to which the carp was the only fish brave enough to swim upstream, past the Dragon Gate, at which point the carp itself turned into a dragon, a magical and powerful creature. The carp’s ability to go beyond the unknown and the hardships has become

emblematic; that is why the carp streamers displayed on Boys' Day are a form of prayer for the children of the house to become endowed with the same noble qualities as the legendary carp. This practice is so widely spread in contemporary Japan that it may seem ancient, yet its roots are also in the Edo period, when warrior families started displaying warrior dolls in their houses and carp figurines at the gates, around the *Tango-no-sekku* day. The *musha ningyō* ("warrior dolls") represent historical figures such as Empress Jingū, Minamoto no Yoshitsune or the Emperor Jimmu, as well as legendary characters such as Momotarō the Peach Boy, or Kintarō the Golden Boy (both are heroes from Japanese folklore, boys endowed with supernatural abilities working for the good of humankind).



Warrior dolls and carp streamers in Kudoyama,
Wakayama Prefecture (April 2011)

More than Hina Matsuri, which is closely connected to fertility rituals and new year practices, *Kodomo-no-hi* appears as a true celebration of childhood, when the multicolored carp streamers flying against the clear blue sky of the month of May suggest infinite freedom and unlimited possibilities for the children who have not yet stepped into the adult world. It is a day when childhood may seem eternal, lush and full of vitality like the beginning of summer, a day when modest fish may turn into royal dragons and the borders between worlds become a little more transparent than usual.

3. Becoming fully human

The next stage in a child's development, which is also an important step towards acknowledging the child as a true member of the community concentrated around a certain shrine, is the *Shichi-go-san* ceremony. As the name indicates (literally, *shichi-go-san* means 7-5-3), this particular celebration is held for boys who have reached the ages of three or five, and for girls who have reached the ages of three or seven. The belief that 3, 5 and 7 are lucky numbers originates in the Chinese doctrine of the *yin, yang*, and the *five elements*, doctrine that was further developed in Japan as *Onmyōdō*¹⁰. An example worth mentioning here is that of the

¹⁰ "While being based on the Chinese theory of *yinyang-wuxing* (Yin-Yang and the "five phases of matter"), Onmyōdō was a unique Japanese adaptation that established itself around the tenth century [...] as a religion of magic." (Hayashi Makoto-http://k-amc.kokugakuin.ac.jp/DM/dbSearchList.do?sessionId=E6C9B432A2247EA2961A7D2543F50BBA?class_name=col_eos&search_condition_type=1&db_search_c

traditional Japanese meal, *honzen ryōri*, composed of three main dishes: *honzen* (“main dish”), *ninozen* (“second dish”) and *sannozen* (“third dish”). *Honzen* consisted of *nanasai* – seven pieces of food, *ninozen* consisted of *gosai* – five pieces of food and *sannozen* consisted, predictably, of *sansai* – three pieces of food.



Three sisters participating in the *Shichi-go-san* ceremony at Sumiyoshi Taisha¹¹

Shichi-go-san has now become a festival with deep roots in Japanese tradition, where the belief in lucky numbers has combined with childhood rites of passage. Three was the age when children’s hair (until then cropped closely to the head) was allowed to grow, in a ceremony called *kami oki*, which marked the end of infancy. At five, the *hakama-gi* ritual

condition_type=0&View=0&focus_type=0&startNo=1&searchFreeword=onmyodo&searchRangeType=0, retrieved on 2016/03/25).

¹¹ Photo courtesy of Ms. Kaori Matsunaga.

was performed, namely, boys who reached that age were allowed to wear a *hakama* (a traditional formal dress for the lower part of the body, usually made of stiff silk), a garment reserved for grown-ups, for the first time in their lives.

Girls participated in a similar ritual at the age of seven, when the narrow belt they had worn until then was replaced by the wider *obi* – the sophisticated girdle worn with a kimono in a ceremony called *obi toki*. Nowadays, the *Shichi-go-san* ceremony is performed at shrines across the country on November 15th, for all children who have reached one of the symbolical ages during that year. According to the *Onmyōdō* practices, the 15th of the 11th month was an auspicious day, yet it did not become the official date for this childhood rite of passage until the Edo period, when the fifth Tokugawa Shōgun, Tsunayoshi, held special festivities on that day for his son, Tokumatsu. In modern times, November 15th is



Five-year old boy proudly wearing his first *hakama*¹²

¹² Photo courtesy of Ms. Kikuko Sano.

an occasion for family celebrations – children visit the shrine accompanied by members of their families, and their names are officially inscribed in the shrine records. They become thus full-fledged *ujiko* (“parishioners”) and are blessed with prayers for good luck, health and happiness.

4. Coming-of-age

Seijin-shiki represents the coming-of-age ritual, which marks the end of childhood and the passage into the adult society, with all the rights and responsibilities it implies. Like most Japanese traditions, there are various names for this ceremony, depending on the area and the sex of the individual. In the case of boys, it was called *genpuku* (“head-wearing”, an indication of the particular hairstyle and hat the young man receives during the ceremony), *eboshi* (special hat worn during their coming-of-age), or *hitai-tori* (the particular hairstyle the boy receives when he is acknowledged as a man). For girls, the celebration was called *yumoji* (“a special girdle for women”) *iwai* or *kane-iwai* (where *kane* is the dye used by nubile women to blacken their teeth). In both cases, the choice of words clearly suggests the transformation of the child into an active member of the community, who was ready to establish his or her own family. At the beginning of Meiji period, the boys’ coming-of-age ceremony was usually performed around the age of fifteen, when their hairstyle was changed and their child name was replaced by their adult name. For girls, the ceremony took place at the age of thirteen

(most likely the age when they started menstruating), when their teeth were blackened with a special dye. For boys, as well as for girls, this was the moment when they were considered adults for the first time, and boys could start working, while the girls could get married.

In modern times, the *Seijin-shiki* is performed on a designated day, the second Monday of January, when all young people who reached the legal age of adulthood (twenty in Japan) between April 1st of the previous year and March 31st of the current year are invited to the local city hall to celebrate this significant day of their lives. Not surprisingly, this is a formal occasion when girls (and sometimes boys) don exquisite kimonos and book well in advance the services of professional photographers. After the ceremony at the city hall, most attendants go to shrines, to pray for good luck in their new life as adults.



Young girl in a ceremonial kimono

The ceremony as it is known today has a fairly recent origin, having been declared a national holiday in 1948 - most likely, one of the official attempts of reinstating the lost pride of the Japanese youth - and until 1999, it was celebrated on January 15th. Following the introduction of the Happy Monday System (a change to Japanese law that moved certain national holidays to Mondays, thus creating three-day “weekends”), *Seijin-no-hi*, the Coming of Age Day was moved to the second Monday of January. While the other ceremonies mentioned so far are organized and controlled by the parents, *Seijin-shiki* is the first where the youths have the power to choose details (what kind of clothes - Western style or Japanese style - and what kind of design, whether to attend the public ceremony or not, how and with whom to celebrate afterwards). This newly acquired freedom can sometimes lead to behaviour so unruly that it is mentioned even by non-Japanese publications¹³, while the Japanese media cover each year some undesirable incident - drinking, altercations with the police - that took place on the Coming of Age Day. While this change in behaviour, completely different from the quiet dignity with which the older generations acknowledged the transition from childhood to maturity and all the responsibility that accompanies it, is loudly deplored in contemporary society, we must note that ritually speaking, the chaotic and apparently irrational gestures can easily be

¹³ *The Telegraph* from January 15th, 2002, has an article on the Japanese Coming of Age Ceremony in its Asia section. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/japan/1381592/Drunken-Japanese-youths-ruin-coming-of-age-rituals.html>

explained. In a symbolic view of the world, chaos always precedes order, and some kind of destruction is the source of all creation, which means that, although they are most like unaware of what they are doing and simply want to celebrate both the beginning (as an adult) and the end (as a child) of freedom, young people nowadays are simply following universal patterns of behaviour.

*

During an interview, a representative from Sumiyoshi Grand Shrine in Osaka deplored the fact that the ceremonies conducted there - *Miya-mairi*, *Shichi-go-san* - are no longer for the gods, but for the people. In other words, people try less to placate and please the gods, while focusing more on family and personal relationships. As mentioned in the introduction, religion has lost its grasp on the individual and the community, being replaced by a combination of science and law. In Japanese society, religion is definitely less prominent than it used to be, but religious practice is still flourishing and plays an important role in the lives of the contemporary Japanese.

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7,000 Buckets of Water: Ascetic Practices within the Nichiren Sect

This paper is the result of more than five years of fieldwork conducted at Gatsuzōji Temple, in Sakai (Osaka Prefecture). When I began the research, I was still working on my doctoral dissertation on Japanese myths, and had not even considered looking into Buddhist rituals. However, my neighbor, the 41st head priest of Gatsuzōji mentioned that he had destroyed his vocal cords during a period of asceticism. I had noticed that his voice was somehow lower and hoarser than one would expect, never suspected the cause. He then went on to recount his experiences and, after realizing what *suigyō* (“water practice”) meant, I was left wondering why a person living in the 20th century, in modern Japan of all countries, would willingly do something like that. I was also amazed at the matter-of-fact tone the priest used when talking about *suigyō*: “It’s actually not so bad, you get used to it. There are other ways of purifying yourself through water, like standing under a waterfall, and that is more painful. It’s

not only the water and the fact that it falls with considerable pressure on your head, but also the pebbles it carries and which may seem small to look at, but which can cause quite a lot of pain.”

So *suigyō* within the Nichiren practices did not mean standing under a waterfall. It means “only” pouring about 70 buckets of ice-cold water over your naked body, on a winter day. Or night.

Asceticism and ascetic practices

Asceticism is a religious practice encountered in all cultures of the world: the practice of self-inflicted pain. Under the form of fasting, sleep deprivation, hair shirts, flagellation or bathing in ice-cold water, humans have always found a way of torturing their bodies, trying to be force encounters with the divine. According to Andre Lalande’s “Vocabulaire critique et technique de la philosophie”, asceticism represents “a moral method of ignoring both pleasure and pain, and of satisfying to the least possible degree the instincts of the animal life or the natural tendencies of sensitivity. [...] Especially in the religious moral life, [asceticism] represents a quest for pain as atonement or mortification, considered useful for the evolution of the soul and pleasing to god.¹” (1962: 18) In other words, it is a method of denying pleasure (or even comfort) by self-inflicting pain.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.

Along centuries and religions, men have contrived various methods of self-inflicting pain in an attempt at soul elevation, purification, sin atonement, or communication with the gods. The degrees of pain vary from mild fasting, which appears in various patterns in most religious communities of the world, to extreme mortification of the flesh. In a medical approach to this phenomenon, Dr. Armando Favazza defines “self-mutilation” as “the deliberate destruction or alteration of one’s body tissue without conscious suicidal intent.” (1996: XVIII) This broad yet accurate definition includes the practices of the “Desert Fathers”, who abstained not only from food, drink and the pleasures of the flesh, but also avoided life in the community, allowed their bodies to be burnt for days on end by the scorching desert sun², wept while praying to atone for their sins or spend years atop pillars in the desert. When it comes to methods of self-mortification, human imagination proves once more to have no limits: the “Desert Fathers” were not the only ones to subject their bodies to severe pain; other Christian orders had similar practices, while in the Islamic tradition believers ripped their flesh with whips made of knife blades during the festivals commemorating the death of Imam Hussein (Reynolds 1955), or slashed their heads, drank boiling water and ate spiny cactus. (Crapanzano 1973:3) The Bhaktas, a Hindu group of religious men, fast and meditate for thirteen days, then submit themselves to harsh practices such as

² “So he rose and stood in the sun for five days, without drinking, and dried himself in the heat.” *The Sayings of the Fathers* (Chadwick 2006: 51).

walking over a bed of needles, walking over hot coals and hanging upside down over a fire, in a rain-making ritual. (Soltan & Rabotteau 2008: 11)

In his analysis of ascetic practices in Japan, Tullio Federico Lobetti notices that “there is no word in Japanese indicating ‘asceticism’ in an abstract sense,” and that “in many cases, the theoretical meaning of an ascetic feat is not explicitly explained; and even when an explanation is given, it is often something that has been attached retrospectively onto a practice having a much more ancient tradition.” (2014: 10) Lobetti goes on to discuss several examples from the perspective of philosophical anthropology, but I shall limit myself to just a few here - instances used to better illustrate the situation in Japan.

Before continuing with my analysis, I must clarify one significant point. The characters central to this paper, be they priests or lay people, are not ascetics in the strictest sense of the world; they do not renounce life in the community, and otherwise lead perfectly normal lives, get married, have children and have parties with their friends. It would seem that life in modern, “civilized”, highly technologized Japan is not exactly conducive to religious frenzy, nevertheless people walk on fire, roll on snow, stand under waterfalls and bathe in ice cold water. The ancient impulse of making the highest possible sacrifice - one’s own body - in order to obtain divine grace is still very much at work even in the 21st century.

Every year, on February 3rd, (during *Setsubun*, a festival marking the day before spring according to the lunar

calendar) people gather at Gangōji Temple³ in Nara, where they undergo a ceremony of purification and pray for good fortune during the new year while walking on embers. The ceremony starts with the leader of the ceremony crossing over the remains of what used to be a tall and hot-burning bonfire, followed by the other priests and finally by the lay participants. I myself attempted the crossing in 2014, and I have to say that the logs placed over the leftover embers were almost cold by the time ordinary people were allowed to take part, which makes the entire ritual more of a symbol than a real endurance feat.



³ Fieldwork conducted in 2008, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2017 and 2018. More details about this in Chapter 4.



Hi watari ("fire crossing") ritual

If the presence of pain is debatable during the ritual at Gangōji, at Kokusekiji Temple⁴ in Iwate Prefecture pain is definitely there at the *Sominsai* festival, a celebration of the New Year, accompanied by prayers for plenty and fertility, which takes place on the seventh day after the New Year according to the lunar calendar. The entire *matsuri* is centered around one night when a group of men from the community bathe naked in the frozen river, take turns standing on a pile of burning wood and roll in snow.

⁴ Fieldwork conducted in 2009



Feats of endurance at Sominsai Matsuri

These two events are by no means singular across Japan. Walking on fire (or on what used to be a fire) is a common occurrence during the Japanese “fire festivals”, most of them involving the burning of the prayer tablets used in the precedent year. Also, the *Sominsai* festival is not limited to Iwate Prefecture and Kokusekiji, although that is its most famous location, since until last year the participants used to be completely naked and the entire event made the news as an attempt to decency and morality. I chose to mention them here for two reasons: both festivals take place at Buddhist temples, and I conducted fieldwork at both events. Why is it important that these events which involve a very real degree of self-inflicted pain take place at Buddhist temples?

Buddhism itself is not a religion that preaches violence, under any form, be it against the self or against another. Buddha himself argued both against self-indulgence and self-mortification⁵, but one must not forget that Buddhism originates in the country of ascetics and fakirs. According to Christoph Kleine, “there can be no doubt that practices such as cutting off or burning one’s own fingers, toes or limbs, in addition to self-immolation, jumping from mountains or trees, drowning oneself in water, gouging out one’s eyes, feeding animals with one’s own blood and flesh, copying sutras using one’s own blood or skin, etc., were well-established practices in Chinese Buddhism.” (2006: 154)

⁵ “[B]y this severe austerity, I do not reach states of further-men, the excellent knowledge and vision befitting the ariyans. Could there be another way to awakening?” (Horner 1953: 301)

And not only in Chinese Buddhism, I might add. An eminent figure in Japanese Buddhism, Myōe Kōben (1173-1232) devised a special term, *shashingyō*, to designate “a type of bodhisattva act of giving in which bodhisattvas sacrifice their own lives, or parts of their bodies, for saving beings.” (Abe 2006: 150) In the name of his belief (and taking the scriptures quite literally, just as some Christian ascetics did), Myōe is famous for some behaviors that would definitely earn him a spot in Dr. Favazza’s book: he cut off his right ear on the peak of Shiragami in Kii Province, he went to a cemetery alone at night and tried to offer himself to hungry wolves, and he wanted to cut off a piece of his flesh because it was believed that human flesh could cure leprosy. (Ibid 148-150)

In contemporary Japan the ascetic practices are no longer that radical, yet they still manage to surprise. The festivals described above take place nowadays inside Buddhist temples, the ceremonies and rites being performed by Buddhist priests, but they are not necessarily Buddhist in origin. It is true that asceticism seems to be a universal human tendency - explained in its most severe forms by pathological conditions and in its milder forms by a strong belief in self-sacrifice for the salvation of self or the others - and in Japan its origin seems to be in a set of local beliefs. Shugen-dō is now often associated with Buddhism; however, originally it meant nature, more precisely mountain worship. Shugen-dō surged in Japan during the Heian Period (794-1185) as a religion based on the concept that by becoming one with nature (through specific initiation rituals), people could obtain supernatural powers and use

them to perform magic. The practitioners of Shugen-dō are called *yamabushi*, those who dwell in the mountains, and the purpose of their rigorous training in the wilderness was precisely this achievement of magical powers, as well as personal illumination. (Kokai 2005: 14-15) The personal aspect is relevant here, because it makes the distinction between a cultural practice that induce a certain, relative amount of pain, and the purposeful infliction of pain, the going “a step further than the ‘ordinary’ level of pain so as to grasp and control its power and thus utilize it as a tool” for one’s own benefit. (Lobetti 11)



Yamabushi in blowing the horagai (conch shell) to purify the air,
and controlling the fire (Gangōji, February 3rd, 2018)

In Shugen-dō, the old Japanese beliefs mingle with esoteric Buddhism and Daoist practices, and prior to World War Two it became associated with two main Japanese Buddhist sects, Shingon and Tendai. Their initiation practices are numerous and varied, but, in order to stay within the scope of this paper, I shall focus only on those which lead to self-inflicted pain⁶.

For the Shugen practitioners, the first method of inflicting a certain degree of pain is, of course, fasting, which means abstaining from both nourishment and drinks during a ritual practice which involves the symbolic descent to the ten Buddhist Hells, one of them being the realm of starvation (Kokai 21). The same voyage *ad infero* is achieved through the inhaling of the smoke from a fire burning with chili powder, rice bran and *dokudami* (a foul-smelling plant of the family Saururaceae), which, according to Shimatsu Kokai, Head Priest at Hagurosan Kotakuji Shozenin, causes “weeping, sore throats and incontrollable coughing, the pain rending the practitioners speechless.” (Ibid)

In the Western world, probably the most known example of Japanese asceticism is *takishugyō*⁷, meditating under a waterfall. It may be true that the meditating monks or *yamabushi* (I must specify here that *yamabushi* are not necessarily priests or monks, as priests or monks of the Shingon or Tendai sects are not necessarily *yamabushi*; both

⁶ As Lobetti states, “the presence of pain seems to connect all the ascetic experiences in the world, regardless of their different socio-historical contexts.” (11)

⁷ More details about *takishugyō*, as well as visual records can be found at <http://www.shugendo.fr/takishugyo.html>

categories have in common the practice of Shugen rituals and techniques) no longer feel the pain once they attain a superior realm of consciousness, yet the pain exists (the cold, the water pressure, the stones that come down from the mountain with the stream of water) and its effects on the human body are undeniable. The desire to attain enlightenment and the religious devotion can be so deep, that monks of the Shingon sect not only abstained from food, but also drank tea made from the toxic sap of the *urushi* tree, which is commonly used to make lacquer. This ritual is called *sokushin jōbutsu*, “attaining Buddhahood while still in the flesh” and it is described in detail in the May 2005 issue of the National Geographic Magazine. At Dainichibo Temple⁸ in Yamagata Prefecture, “the priest known as Daijuku Bosatsu Shinnyokai Shonin lived in austerity. He ate nothing except berries, bark, and nuts. He spent his days and nights climbing in the mountains, through the heat of summer and snows of winter. Finally, he sensed his days were coming to an end and ate nothing. He feasted on the idea of starvation and self-sacrifice. He grew thin, then thinner. He sipped tea made from the toxic sap of the *urushi* tree, used to make lacquer. Near the end he drank only from hot spring waters that, unbeknownst to him, contained high levels of arsenic. The *urushi* sap, a purgative, induced vomiting and urination, desiccating the priest's body. Arsenic, a preservative, killed bacteria that would cause decay.

⁸ The history of the mummified priest, accompanied by relevant photos, is available on the website of the Dainichibo Temple: <http://dainichibou.or.jp/soku/index.html>

Shriveled, emaciated, he withered away. When he died in 1783 at 96, he was buried in a mound of earth and stones. Three years later, when exhumed, his skin looked as if lacquered onto a skeleton.” (Newman: 2005)

The Nichiren Tradition

Shinnyokai’s body had become his prayer and his offering to the gods, just as pain represented no longer a form of self-abuse, but an attempt at enlightenment, escaping the material world, and finally, the ultimate sacrifice. A similar goal is present within *aragyō*, term which could be translated as “the violent practice,” and which indicates the ascetic practices within the Nichiren sect. Nichiren, the founder of the sect which bears his name, was educated at a Tendai temple, and introduced many of the Shugen techniques in the new religious movement he created. The *yamabushi* described above are seen as endowed with magical powers (as a result of their special initiation practices in the mountain): they can walk on fire, boil themselves in water or perform miraculous healings (Cornu 2006: 559). Similarly wondrous acts are expected of the priests who return from their retreat on the mountain (again, the mountain represents the border between worlds, the closest place to the dwelling of the gods) after one hundred days of ascetic practices, whose prayers become more efficient and who acquire the power to perform healings and exorcisms. Their parishioners are willing to pay considerable amounts of money (the largest

one, about 30 centimeters in length, was 50,000 yen in 2008) for prayer tablets to be written by their priest while he is confined in the sacred precinct.

From the perspective of the history of religions, the Nichiren sect is a relatively new organization, having been founded in the 13th century, yet it has become one of the six most important Buddhist sects in Japan. Although the sacred records indicate Nichiren himself as having magical powers⁹, the means by which he obtained them are not clear and there are no records of Nichiren himself having gone through any ascetic training. It is his successor, Nichizō, who in 1293, October 26, begins his one hundred days of ascetic practices, when, according to his own words¹⁰, he spent day and night reading the sacred words of the Sutra, oblivious to wind, cold, or time. Thus he establishes a tradition uninterrupted to the present day, which asserts the importance of a formal initiation of a shamanistic type, indispensable for those who wanted to perform specific prayer rituals. Miyazaki Eishū, himself a Nichiren priest and an authority in the field of prayer rituals and ascetic practices within this sect, asserts

⁹ One famous example is the Tatsu-no-kuchi incident, when Nichiren (who had been sentenced to death for his virulent attacks against the authority of the time), is miraculously saved by his chanting the *Lotus Sutra* at the moment of execution. The episode, which was repeatedly described later in various artifacts, tells how, as Nichiren was chanting the sacred words, a sudden gust of wind broke the blade of the executioner's sword into three pieces, and the shock of this was enough to disable the executioner from taking further action, until moments later a messenger arrived from Kamakura with a letter of pardon for Nichiren. (Uchimura 2004: 275)

¹⁰ The information is recorded in one of the letters written by Nichizō, currently in the archives of the Myōkenji Temple in Kyoto.

that “it is not likely that Nichiren’s disciples continued the prayer rituals as they had been performed by the master. The new prayer rituals probably evolved from a reinterpretation of the older Tendai and Shingon practices combined with the Master’s teachings.” (Eishū 1980: 291)

It is interesting to note how, despite the high importance of ritual prayers within the Nichiren sect, ascetic practices (the only way of obtaining the authority and power to perform these rituals) are relegated to a secondary place. These prayer rituals have a clear practical nature: they were performed for curing diseases, protecting the country from enemies or the safety of the imperial family. In our times, one can observe the performance of prayers ranging from charms for curing diseases, safe pregnancies and deliveries, predicting the sex of the child or curing morning sickness, prosperity in trade or stopping children from wetting their beds and crying at night, finding missing persons or finding love. The fact that the acquisition of power is not explicitly described (at least, not in the sources available to those who are not ordained Nichiren priests) can be partly explained by the *murosojo* principle, never to reveal a master’s teachings to an outsider, principle which is still respected in the 21st century Japan.

***Aragyō* - 100 days of Asceticism**

On the 1st of November, ordained priests of different ages, all belonging to the Nichiren Sect, gather at the Hokekyō-ji Temple, in Chiba Prefecture, for one hundred days of austerities. They are men living in modern-day Japan, young men just like any other, who play video games in their free time, take part in bowling competitions or go drinking with their friends. Most of them have wives and children; those who do not are fairly young, but they too will have families in the future. They are all aware of the hardships ahead: once they go through the gate, *Zuimon*, the border between the sacred life they are about to live and the profane one they are departing from, there is no turning back. Under no circumstances can the priests leave the sacred precincts, *Gyōdō*, of their harsh ascetic term.





Gyōdō and *Zuimon* in December 2007, when I joined Mr. Nobutoshi Kanayama's family and parishioners for a visit at Hokekyōji

Compared to some of the examples given in the first part of this paper (and to be sure, they are just a few), what happens behind *Zuimon* may seem fairly mild, yet there are a couple elements that we must consider when analyzing *aragyō*:

- all the participants are otherwise ordinary people, who lead a regular everyday life (contrasting thus with the ascetics who make the infliction of pain a purpose into itself);
- the term is strictly limited to 100 days and it is not possible to participate every year.

The priests who want to participate in *aragyō* must submit an application in advance and must go through a very

thorough medical check-up. The rules are so strict (there have been cases of death inside the *Gyōdō*), that Mr. Nobutoshi Kanayama, one of the participants, was worried that his being slightly overweight might represent a reason for not being admitted in November 2007.

Wearing white robes (a sign that they are dead to the outside world), with their heads completely shaved, the priests leave the lay world. Before the austerities begin, the novices trust their lives into the hands of their masters: 「百日間生命をあずけます」. Out of the 24 hours of a day, the priests can afford only three hours of sleep, on cold straw mats, dressed in thin cotton kimonos and covered with flimsy futons. After a while, even those futons seem to offer too much comfort, and they are given up, as priests fear they might feel too comfortable and oversleep. The day is divided by the *suigyō* times: the cold-water bathing is practiced at 3, 6 and 9 in the morning, at noon, and then again at 3, 6 and 11 in the afternoon. The ablutions are followed by sutra chanting.



Nyūgyō (entering the *gyōdō*, 37 years
Mr. Shogo Kanayama is the second
figure in the photo)



Mr. Nobutoshi Kanayama in 2007

In fact, this is one of the purposes of *aragyō*: educating the priests. It is here where they learn how to properly chant a sutra, how to meditate and how to use a *bokken* in special prayer ceremonies. After splashing cold water on one's body in a winter night, chanting a sutra indoors may seem comparatively easy, yet it is not necessarily so. No room in the *Gyōdō* is heated and, although winters in Japan are not particularly harsh, I can say from experience that after having knelt for 30 minutes on the tatami covered floor of one of those rooms (wearing warm woolen clothes, of course), I felt frozen to the core. The priests are barefooted and they have to remain in the same position, a most rigid *seiza*, on the hard, straw covered floors, concentrating in order to put their whole strength in the abdomen and chant is as powerful a voice as possible. This is an exercise which leads not only to coarse voices, but to bleeding as well. Many participants (especially those who are there for the first time) vomit blood after a week or so of almost incessant chanting.

Patrick Olivelle (31) sees “the control of the sexual appetite” and “the control of hunger and pain” as hallmarks of “elite asceticism”. Inside the *Gyōdō* sexual abstinence is a matter of fact, the presence of pain is obvious, and practitioners must also deal with hunger. They have only two meals a day, in the morning and in the evening, consisting of rice gruel, miso soup and pickles. The average weight loss during those 100 days is of 20 kilograms, and the toll on the body obvious for three more months after the austerities are over. The voices never return to what they used to be before

the first *aragyō*, the skin is in quite a bad condition and the loss of a tooth is a common occurrence.

As I said before, *aragyō* is not only a period of punishing the body, but also a time for enlightening the spirit. The priests copy parts of the *Lotus Sutra* which were selected by Nichiren, the founder of their sect, as being particularly effective as prayers. They are also initiated in the secret meanings of the *Sutra* and Nichiren's teachings, and they learn how to use the *bokken* (literally, "wooden sword," actually a wooden prayer tablet used with a string of prayer beads to create a sound similar to that produced by castanets).

A characteristic trait of the ascetic practices within the Nichiren Sect is the fact that they are performed as a group. *Aragyō* has a very strict hierarchy: 初行 (*shogyō* - first practice), 再行 (*saigyō* - repeated practice), 参行 (*sangyō* - involved practice), 再再行 (*saisaigyō* - doubly repeated practice), 五行 (*gogyō* - fifth practice), 伝師部助員 (*denshibu join* - assistant to the master), 副伝師 (*fukudenshi* - master adjunct), at the top being 正伝師 (*sei-denshi* - true master) and 伝主 (*denshu* - leader). In a collection of photographs from the *Gyōdō* (1982), the following incident is related: the priests who have joined the austerities for the first time "are ranked in the lowest organization based on unquestioning submission to superiors. They are divided into Mura (villages). Members seek advice from their respective Mura chiefs concerning personal complaints and worries. If any trouble occurs in a Mura, it is reported to the leader of the chiefs. If the leader fails to solve the problem, it is then carried forward to a representative of

those graded one rank above, i.e. those with a year more experience in the austerities. Thus, the issue is moved up in the order of ranks. A solution presented somewhere during the process is then carried down in the opposite order. Every issue is dealt with in this manner. A careless small mistake committed by one member claims collective responsibility of his Mura as a whole. At about one in the morning, when all other Mura are asleep, the Mura whose member caused trouble is suddenly attacked by senior monks. It is time for *Shasui* - bathing of repentance and thanks for senior monks' punishment. The responsible monks keep pouring freezing cold water over themselves for an hour and a half. They are not permitted to let out any yells. *Suigyō* is hardly bearable without letting out cries. At the sight of the fellow monks silently enduring, the monk who committed the mistake cannot contain tears. The monks are thus made aware to the bone what an individual's self-centered act can mean in a communal society." (p. 62)



Suigyō performed upon return from the Gyōdō¹¹

¹¹ Photos courtesy of Mr. Shogo Kanayama.

As Mr. Shogo Kanayama (the head priest at the Gatsuzōji Temple, the temple next to which I lived for seven years) notes, within the walls of the *Gyōdō*, “neither educational background, nor the position in the priestly hierarchy or in the lay society, but solely the experience of the austerities is what matters.” (Gatsuzōji Newsletter, November 6th, 2007) Also, one is reminded of the 12th century Cistercians, who placed “an emphasis on community as well as obedience to a superior. [...] A monk learned humility and obedience not only through his response to the abbot’s care and authority but also through his interactions with his brothers. [...] For the Cistercians, life in a community was an essential component in the process of disciplining the will.” (Newman 2005)

History, Prayer and Magic

The history and significance of *aragyō* are closely connected to the concept of *kitō*, prayer. The declared purpose of the participants in the ascetic practices is to pay a debt of gratitude towards Nichiren, the founder of the sect, by experiencing hardships similar to those he had to endure during his lifetime. They aim to purify themselves, in order to become better spiritual guides for their parishioners. Also, during the 100 days they pray for their parishioners: for the souls of the departed and for the health and well-being of the living.

Nichiren himself is said to have compiled a set of the most prayer-efficient parts of the *Lotus Sutra* in a work called *Kitōkyō* (*The Sutra of Prayers*), and to have explained to his

disciples how these prayers are meant to be performed. According to the existing records, Nichiren's disciple, Nichizō, prayed for 100 days on Kamakura Yuigaoka, in the 14th century. After that, during the Edo period (1603-1827) the practice of *Hoke-shūgen* (using *The Lotus Sutra* for prayers) associated with forms of asceticism became quite widespread. The Shugen-dō followers mentioned above also use *The Lotus Sutra* for prayers while practicing asceticism, and some of the techniques acquired during the ascetic term (such as the power to perform exorcism, to cast away evil and to heal the sick) are common both to Shugen-dō and Nichiren-shū.

Going back to the beginnings of *aragyō*, its rules were established by Nichikyū, the third abbot of the Onju-in Temple, in the Genroku Period (1688-1704). Nichikyū, after having completed himself one thousand days of austerities, compiled *The Sacred Book on the Transmission of Prayers (Kitōsōden-sho)* and laid down the rules for 100 days of harsh austerities, *aragyō*. However, the practice as it is performed today dates no earlier than the period after the Second World War, and even then the number of the participants was fairly limited.

From a ritual perspective, *aragyō* is closely related to shamanism. The influence of the Shugen-dō practices is no secret, and the connection between the *yamabushi* and shamans has been discussed in detail by renowned authors such as Carmen Blacker or Ichiro Hori, so I shall not insist upon it any further. Nichiren, like all great faith founders, understood the need of the common people for magic and miraculous. Thus, although he could not have described his

own birth (when a pure water spring is said to have gushed forth in a fisher's garden, while a white lotus of unusual size, entirely out of season, blossomed nearby - Uchimura 2004), he mentioned in his writings other episodes which manage at the same time to confer him an aura of holiness and to establish the omnipotence of the *Lotus Sutra*.

One is the Tatsu no Kuchi incident, already discussed here. Nichiren's having been condemned to death may be a historical fact, but the "miracle" of his salvation requires interpretation. The sacred words he is supposed to have chanted then are: "When on the scaffold life is to end,/ And Kannon's power is contemplated,/ The blade of the sword to pieces will crumble.¹²" No matter how profound a sacred book might be, it is not very likely to contain a specific charm for any given situation; there is a higher probability, nonetheless, that its metaphors could be applied to a large variety of actual occurrences. The passage Nichiren chanted and his *ad literam* salvation indicate that he may have used this incident to actually explain the hidden meaning of the Sutra to his audience and, of course, to impress them with the scripture's magical efficacy. Another significant element is noted by Nichiren: on his way to the execution place, he stopped in front of a shrine dedicated to the god Hachiman, not to pray, as it may have been natural, but to remonstrate with the god for his lack of support towards a great believer in the *Lotus Sutra* and to threaten him, saying that once arrived in Paradise, he would complain to Buddha about

¹² Uchimura 2004, translation by Kazuo Inamori.

Hachiman Bosatsu and Tenshō Daijin's, and their failure to accomplish the protector roles (*Shuju Onfurumai Goshō* 2009: 965). This gesture is generally considered a prayer rite in itself, *honzon kashaku*, reproaching the god for his failure to fulfill his duty towards the believers.

As to the way these prayers were actually performed, we have little information, except that passages from the *Lotus Sutra* were used every time. One clue appears in the same *Shuju Onfurumai Goshō*, when Nichiren talks about his Sado exile: "Every day and night I climb a high mountain, face the Sun or the Moon and in a big voice I reproach them. It is a voice that can be heard in the entire country." (977) Miyazaki Eishū interprets this passage as Nichiren's belief (external, at least) that, despite omens such as the floating of a huge stone on the sea surface or the fact that rain which fell from the sky did not reach the ground, he, as a devout believer in the *Lotus Sutra*, was not allowed to return to Kamakura, and that meant that the lesser gods had abandoned him.

It is interesting to note how Nichiren, fully aware of the importance of the local customs and traditions, does not try to obliterate them (despite his energetic and furious action against other Buddhist sects), but follows the more peaceful way of assimilating them into the new faith, indicating at the same time a heavenly hierarchy at the top of which one can find Buddha, the path to reach him being the *Lotus Sutra*. The Tatsu no Kuchi incident is not the only one where Nichiren manifests his (or rather the Sutra's) magical powers. Again, according to his own recordings (*Kaenjōgō Goshō* 862), in

1264 Nichiren returns to his hometown to find his mother seriously ill, but his prayers bring her back and she lives four more years after that.

Comparing and connecting all these elements, Nichiren can be easily envisioned as a bona fide shaman, and I am not talking here about the feather-and-hide clad primitive medicine man, but of the shaman as seen by Ioan Lewis (1984: 9): “a shaman is an inspired prophet and leader, a charismatic religious figure, with the power to control the spirits.” If we accept this vision about Nichiren, then many of his actions and his followers’ actions become less obscure. As a “charismatic religious figure”, Nichiren was not only a learned man, but also one who knew how to captivate his audiences and induce them to accept and believe in what he probably genuinely believed too. Nichiren established a ritual pattern of communicating with the divinity in which the powerful voice (nowadays during a *kitō* ritual, sutra passages may not be read slowly or in a whispered voice) plays no minor role, but where, from the audience’s perspective, the meaning actual sacred text is of secondary importance. For the priest, however, the Sutra remains of the greatest importance, and to this purpose Nichiren created the *Senhōkekyō* or *Kitōkyō*, a collection of what he considered to be the most prayer-efficient parts of the *Lotus Sutra*, which (in accordance with the esoteric tradition of the sect) was available to priests only.

Nichiren’s disciple, Nichizō, continues the tradition of the formal prayer rite created by his master, and establishes the Myōkenji Temple in Kyoto, a sacred site officially

recognized by the Emperor, who becomes a prayer center for the Nichiren Sect. The relationship with shamanism and shamanistic initiation rituals is evident in the fact that in 1293, October 26, Nichizō begins his one hundred days of ascetic practices, when, according to his own words¹³, he spent day and night reading the sacred words of the Sutra, oblivious to wind, cold, or time. He thus created a tradition uninterrupted to the present day, which asserts the importance of a formal initiation of a shamanistic type, indispensable for those who wanted to perform specific prayer rituals.

We have proof of a very shaman-like ritual performed by Nichizō at the order of Emperor Gokōgon, a rain charm, which proved so efficient that the Emperor decided to bestow the title of Bodhisattva on Nichiren, Nitchō and Nichizō. The various practices related to the *kitō* rites were transmitted from master to disciple, yet most masters also left written documents regarding these rituals. For example, Nichizō wrote *Kitōkyō guketsu*, Nitchō (his follower) wrote *Gokitō no koto*, or *Saihigofu*, while Nichii (to remain in the Middle Ages span) wrote *Shudai kengyō sōden*. These and many other documents containing concrete information about the way the *kitō* were practiced in the beginning are kept as treasures inside Myōkenji, Minobu-san or Hokekyōji, access to them being very restricted. This is due to the esoteric principle of never revealing a master's teachings to an outsider, based on another metaphorical text compiled in 1607 by the head

¹³ *Daikaku Shojō*, a manuscript kept at the Myōkenji Temple in Kyoto.

priest of the temple on Minobu-san, *Kitōbyōsuishō*, whose title is relevant enough: the knowledge concerning the practice of the *kitō* and interpretation of the sacred texts should be transmitted from one receptacle to another, without spilling any of the precious information to those who are not prepared to receive it.

The connection with the indigenous Japanese practices is apparent in an example from a manuscript preserved at Myōkenji, where it is recorded that Nichiryū forbid the usage of *miko* and *kannagi* (Shinto shamans) as part of the *kitō* rites, fact which clearly suggest their relationship with Shinto rituals. Moreover, Nichizō had accepted the worship of the “Thirty Tutelaries”, the Shinto gods who had earlier been assimilated by the Tendai sect as well. This is an indication that the sacred excerpts of the *Lotus Sutra* and their commentaries were meant for scholarly priests, while the common people had to be satisfied with magical performances, an element which appears in all known religions.

Talking about actual implements used during the *kitō* rituals, their esoteric nature and their transmission from master to disciple suggest that they may not have changed much across centuries, and what we observe today may be what medieval people saw too. For example, a statue of Nichiren created seven years after his death (in 1291) shows him holding a sutra scroll and a *hossu* whose hair was made of Nichiren’s mother’s real hair. The same instruments are used today during *kitō* ceremonies; the *hossu* is used to indicate the priest’s authority and rank, while the sutra scrolls (most of

them written during the one hundred days of ascetic practices) are used to touch the bodies of the believers and bless them.

Another instrument used in the present day *kitō* is the *bokken*, a symbolic wooden sword, whose existence is attested in the Middle Ages. Its shape was similar with the one it has today, and besides sutra lines, it bore the absolutely necessary inscription of *namu myō hōrenge kyō*, as well as the names of the most important deities worshipped within these rituals: Kishimojin, Jūrasetsunyo, Tenshō Daijin, Hachiman Bosatsu.



Bokken and flint used to light purifying sparks before the prayer ceremony (Gatsuzōji, January 13, 2009)

Ascetic Practices and Community Ties

The main goal of *aragyō* as it is performed nowadays is mainly community-oriented. The priests go through 100 days of starvation, lack of sleep, cold and physical pain as representatives of their communities rather than for personal salvation or enlightenment. The prayer techniques described above are learned for the benefit of their parishioners, as well as for the welfare of the temple - the presence of a priest who has completed at least one cycle of ascetic practices (most participants usually go at least twice) is sure to attract more parishioners, who come looking for a holy spiritual leader or efficient prayer rituals.

The *aragyō* participants join a practice deeply marked by shamanistic characteristics: they enter the sacred world delimited by *Zuimon* wearing white robes, similar to those in which they will be buried. They are neophytes, dead to the outer world. Their departure from the lay world is marked by tears and sadness which, although can be easily explained by the natural emotions experienced at a separation from one's beloved, have here a highly ritual value. For three months they are as dead to lay society and their return is a true resurrection, often accompanied by miracles. Their confessed objectives may be different, built upon various religious concepts, but their ritual behavior is that of a shaman on his way to initiation. And they do receive initiation, at different levels, which is secret knowledge that the priests referred to during interviews, without ever giving any details.

Another suggestive element is the lack of sleep the practitioners must endure and which is, according to their confessions, the hardest thing to bear. We can easily think of Eliade's association of the lack of sleep with initiation: "Not to sleep, that is more than merely vanquishing the physical fatigue, it means proving will and spiritual force: staying awake means that one is present, aware of the world, responsible." (1959: 48)

During *aragyō*, the participants must also learn meditation techniques, thus described by Zen-iku Toda (the chief priest of the Onju-in Temple): "Contemplation Practice. This practice is done from a calm aspect (as opposed to what he calls the active aspect, the chanting of the sutra). The practitioner sits crossed-legged in front of a scroll on which a circle is drawn and contemplates the circle. He should contemplate the circle only and not let any other thoughts be born in his mind. The circle is a complete and perfect figure and a symbol of enlightenment. Conducting this contemplation practice, one will be able to reach the state of non-existence of function and thought. If an idle thought should occur in his mind, he may stand up and walk around the hall to put it out of his mind by contemplating walking. If he can re-gain a calm mind, he should sit again and start to contemplate the circle."

Without participating in the 100 days of ascetic practices, one cannot venture to say what is that the participants feel or whether they experience mystical ecstasy (although the physical hardships they have to endure are definitely conducive to such manifestations), but the experience has a definite impact on their attitudes and behavior, something I

was able to observe directly upon Mr. Nobutoshi Kanayama's return from *aragyō* in February 2008. The change could probably be analyzed and explained using tools from the field of psychology, but this is not the purpose of this paper. What is important here is the effect such a change has on the parishioners, who see their priest as having been endowed with new and, if not supernatural, at least out-of-reach for the ordinary people, powers, as well as an aura of holiness.

***Kizanshiki*: Ritual and Performance in the Homecoming Ceremony**

That is why the ceremony celebrating the homecoming of the priest, *kizanshiki*, the return from the mountain, is staged mainly for the local community. Unlike the ascetic practices, in this case my account is first-hand, having participated not only in the ceremony itself, but also in its preparations. The priest's participation in *aragyō* (although by no means compulsory within the Nichiren Sect) is possibly the greatest event in the life of a temple and *kizanshiki* is one of the most important ceremonies.

At Gatsuzōji, the participant was the son-in-law of the main priest, and thus there was one priest who stayed behind to take care of the temple. When there is only one priest, he designates a friend (another priest, of course) to take care of the main events, such as funerals, memorials, and organizing the *kizanshiki* in his absence. At Gatsuzōji, the parishioners were announced by letter that their priest, Mr. Nobutoshi

Kanayama, would perform the 100 days of austerities, and then the event (together with a short history and explanation about *aragyō*) was published in the temple's newsletter.

As after 35 days the priests confined within the sacred precincts of the *Gyōdō* are allowed to receive visitors, two such trips to Chiba Prefecture were organized for the parishioners. There we could meet Mr. Kanayama and a special prayer, was performed for us. The belief in the miraculous powers of such prayers is still great, improvements in the health condition, capacity of concentration and children's behavior having been reported afterwards.



Gatsuzōji in February 2008, before the *kizanshiki*

The Homecoming Ceremony is clearly a performance, done for the benefit of the audience. Its climax is, of course, the performing of *suigyō* in front of the parishioners. Every gesture is audience-oriented and nothing is done for the mere sake of asceticism, although for the priests themselves having to repeat the purification ritual several times after leaving *Gyōdō* is far from being pleasant or easy. Yet they must do it for their believers, who regard them as close to sainthood (a proof in this respect is the way they try to touch the priests' robes, which the ascetic period has transformed into sacred relics).



The return of the priest. *Suigyō* within the temple precincts

The ceremony continues in the main hall of the temple, with the performing of a prayer for the benefit of all present, and then the priest interacts directly with his audience. He has prepared a speech in which he talks about his experiences during *aragyō* and expresses his gratitude for having been able to complete the 100 days. The participants, rather than having an epiphany, are moved by the hardships endured by their priest and by the feelings he manages to convey.



Kitō and reading the letter to parishioners

The importance of this practice in the life of a temple is suggested by the fact that the number of the participants has recently gone up: if immediately after the Second World War, about 10 priests gathered at Hokekyōji, now their number is close (and sometimes surpasses) 100. One explanation would be the necessity of bringing back the sacred in the lay community. Recently, fewer people actually belong to a temple and more Japanese are using the funeral houses (which offer complete packages) instead of the family temple for funeral ceremonies. There are several factors which contribute to the spreading of this phenomenon (the economical one being quite significant), yet one cannot overlook a feeling of alienation from the old traditions and connection with religion. That is why I consider that the main function of *aragyō* is to create a bridge between the world as we know it and the world of the sacred, proving one more time how rituals and ritual practices are an integral, vital part of any society. *Aragyō* 荒行 (the violent practice) is no longer a secret ritual, but a way of bringing the extra-ordinary into an ordinary world, of making the sacred more accessible, tangible. This idea is further enhanced by the fact that, upon his return, the priest performs some of the ritual gestures (such as pouring buckets of ice-cold water over his naked body) in front of the believers gathered to welcome him home. He gains thus more authority and credibility in front of his parishioners, while at the same time offering them the much-needed connection with the sacred.

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