

## *MATSURI* - ESSENCE OF JAPANESE SPIRITUALITY -

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### Abstract

*Benefiting from the precious help of her advisor, Professor Shunsuke Okunishi at Osaka Gaidai, and from many fieldwork trips occasioned by the two generous Japan Foundation Fellowships (2000-2001 and 2005-2006), the author of this article was most fortunate to enjoy the lively rhythm of the Japanese traditional festivals as a witness. She voices her satisfaction in knowing that, despite modernity and influences from other countries, matsuri may still be found in abundance in Japan, standing for its genuine spirituality. The author illustrates the diversity of matsuri either through symbolical meanings or by outlining parades of portable shrines or floats, rituals specific of agricultural festivals, the traditional dances Japan has boasted about along the historical periods as seen in On-matsuri, or even Kyoto's history through the epochs.*

Anybody knows that Japan is one of the most advanced nations in the world, but only few are likely to admit that it is spiritually very strong as well, since it has preserved the treasures of its particular culture in various marvelous ways. The segment of tradition I am going to focus upon is maybe less known, but at the same time less affected by the aggressive attack of cultural globalization. Though some people say that *matsuri* ("traditional festivals") seem sometimes frayed at the edges, especially in big cities, they are deeply ingrained in the Japanese soul. To be unaware of their beauty is to be unaware of beauty itself. The growth and modernization of a city do not crowd out festivals. On the contrary, they become more elaborate, as for example *Sanno-matsuri* in Tokyo which displays traditional events for a week at the beginning of June every other year.

Japanese are able to live apart from the maddening traffic and from the crazy daily rhythm for a couple of hours so that they might revive images of portable shrines which triumphantly enter the realm of the *kami* ("deities") they love and respect. They could realize they are really themselves only when in direct touch with their ancestors' past, which defines the lasting element and shapes the survival of such festivals. In other words, their reverential attitude signifies the gratitude of the present towards the past. And why not of the future? One should not forget there is no future without past.

Besides the delightful entertainment the *matsuri* offer, they also enchant through becoming a moving stage on which the history of Japanese culture unfolds.

Each of them conveys a message related to the ancient history which pours forth into the precincts of the shrines and into the streets of the towns and villages. There are few people all over the world who can boast about such precious lore. Japan may be the single one among the advanced nations.

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Going back to the early days of Shinto, before the advent of Buddhism in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, I would like to point out that it consisted of a bunch of animistic beliefs according to which there was a *kami* in everything that was animate or inanimate. Besides the deities in the Japanese pantheon, the spirit of the wind, of the storm, of rivers and mountains, etc. were all considered *kami*. An old tree, a small waterfall, a strangely shaped stone, a beautiful flower – all of them could fill the Japanese soul with respect and fear and became *kami*. Important alike were the national heroes, famous people, real and imaginary ancestors. Towards all this, the Japanese felt love and gratitude and the urge to soothe their souls.

Hence, the genuine traditional Japan is the country of the *kami* and of the festivals dedicated to them. *Matsuri* can be looked upon as the art through which the human – deity relationship is preserved lively and harmonious, their long tradition resulting in a unique cultural model.

It happens so because Japanese traditional communities feel like ritualizing their existence. I heartily admired the skill the Japanese show in substituting the religious ideal for the familial and, eventually, for the social one. The festivals performed at Shinto shrines are said to originate in winning over the goodwill of the eight millions deities – *kami* – by dint of prayers, thanks and offerings, in order to ensure the peaceful life of the individual and of the community. It seems to have been the aim, but the means it is achieved through are so numerous that one lifetime is not enough to cover them all. It would be altogether impossible as long as almost one hundred thousand Shinto shrines lie in the core of the Japanese spiritual life. Each of them hosts annually at least one festival dedicated to the guardian *kami* as well as to an agricultural event, while big shrines boast about by far more festivals (for instance, Izumo shrine is said to display seventy two). It is such traditional events that make one better understand the value of order regulated by ritual reiterations, the order that becomes the supporting pillar of tradition. And I dare say it is not a tradition fettered in any obsolete time-frame, but a living tradition to which each generation came to add a distinctive feature through intensely emotional participation. It no longer belongs to history, but to eternity, re-creating the past which becomes present.

I think it is easier to infer the meaning of the true Japanese spirituality through examples, and that is why I am choosing to illustrate it through one *matsuri* for each month of the calendar year, at the same time aiming for the emphasis upon their diversity.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, the Japanese visit a Shinto shrine in order to thank the God of the Year or the Guardian God for the fulfilled dreams and to pray for good health and success in career. Many people buy *omikuji* (literally “sacred lot”). In fact, they are fortunetelling paper strips, randomly chosen from a box or from the rack. People hope for the resulting fortune to be good. However, if the prophecy is not good, they tie the *omikuji* to a branch of a tree in the precincts of the shrine with a view to getting rid of it. Then all the family (grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren) gather round the table and eat *osechi-ryōri* – consisting of food of good omen due to its shape, color, taste or name, each offering a specific meaning. For instance, the black beans urge one to be very careful about everything; the pile of caviar symbolizes fertility; the lobster with its curved back signifies long life; through the holes of the lotus root one can see the bright future; *konbu* (the brown seaweed) means happiness and wealth, etc.

On the first Sunday in February, the field fertility is combined with and encouraged by human fertility at Asukaimasu shrine in Nara. After staging the plowing ritual, there follows the miming of sexual intercourse. The ritual is called *taue-tsuke* (“the plant takes roots”). According to folk belief, the marriage between two divine beings brings about both fertility and abundant harvest. Though apparently very sober, *Onda-matsuri* is a parody that keeps rousing peals of laughter. The “fertility” on the stage is passed on to the public by throwing rice cakes and the pine twigs used at the ritual of nursery transplant. The ritual is called “spreading happiness”, the beneficiaries being the spectators as a result of the magic transfer.

Spring sends its echo through the vibrations of the cherry blossoms which, as a symbol of ephemeral life, blossom and helplessly fall down to the ground in only a couple of days. But as long as they are in full bloom, they possess the features of supreme beauty. Impressive alike is the spectacle of viewing them. People throng the precincts of the temples and shrines, as well as the streets flanked by cherry trees in order to enjoy to the full the wonderful scene.

*Yasurai-matsuri* that goes on at Imamiya shrine in Kyoto on the second Sunday of April opens the series of events which aim at preventing the awful epidemics that menace both harvest and people’s health. According to folk belief, music and dance are considered to soothe the restless petrels flying over Kyoto with cherry blossoms in their beaks, ready to spread epidemics. During the festival, men and children

dressed up like red and black demons jump and dance to the rhythm of drums and flutes in the precincts of the shrine and in the streets in order to drive away all evils.

*Aoi-matsuri* takes place in Kyoto throughout the month of May. It is said to date back to the reign of Emperor Yōmei (the years 586-587) when the country was ravaged by unusual drought and awful starvation. In order to pacify the violent spirits, the Emperor sent a delegation to the Kamo-shrines (Kamigamo and Shimogamo) to take to the guardian gods offerings of food and prayers for the rain. A couple of years later, devastating floods brought about severe damage. Other prayers could be heard, this time for the withdrawal of waters and for the placation of the God of Thunder. The priests of the two Kamo shrines initiated a procession within each shrine so that they might pacify the angry gods.

Among the rituals that precede the great procession on May 15<sup>th</sup>, *Mikage-matsuri* shows the descent of the deity to the place of celebration. Over one hundred priests dressed in special attire start from Shimogamo shrine to meet the sacred spirit at Mikage shrine, their procession being considered the oldest in Japan. Here, the deity is given offerings of food the spectators are not even allowed to look at during the religious ritual, but they partake of the offerings after the departure of the deity embodied in a *sakaki* twig (*sakaki* is considered to be the sacred tree). The divine spirit is taken to a temporary abode where he is entertained with songs and dances and then transferred to Tadasu forest in the precincts of the Shimogamo shrine, where he is moved on to the back of a white horse (looked upon as a messenger of the deity in ancient times). They both (deity and horse) watch, between the five-color curtains, the most ancient Japanese dance – *Azuma-asobi*.

For the spectators, the most impressive event is the procession on May 15<sup>th</sup> which extends up to one kilometer in length, displaying about five hundred persons dressed up in national costumes specific of the Heian era (794-1184). It starts with the Imperial Envoy, followed by an ox-drawn Imperial carriage, huge umbrellas decorated with big artificial flowers symbolizing richness, and ending with the retinue of Saio-dai, considered in olden times to be the deity's wife for one night.

The ox used for the ritual of plowing within *Taue-matsuri* at Sumiyoshi shrine in Osaka, on June 14<sup>th</sup>, is also adorned to look attractive. After the religious ritual at the shrine, one of the high-rank priests goes down to the sacred field, being followed by a long train of priests, musicians, dancers, little “warriors”, planters, etc. The spectacle at the shrine includes scenes from various historical periods.

The women engaged in nursery transplant sing songs while the men accompany them on drums and flutes. Meanwhile, the spectators can watch specific dances with a very old history, performed on the stage in the middle of the sacred paddy field.

In July, Kyoto impresses both through traditional rituals and opulence. *Gion-matsuri* dates back to 869 when, in order to put an end to devastating epidemics, 66 *hoko* (“portable shrines”) were assembled in the precincts of Yasaka shrine. There was one *hoko* for each of Japan’s provinces at that time. *Gion-matsuri* originated in the belief according to which revenging spirits and the God of Epidemics could be placated through rituals and entertainment.

*Gion-matsuri* starts on July 1<sup>st</sup> and ends on the 30<sup>th</sup>. The most impressive event is the procession of the floats on July 17<sup>th</sup>. The ones moving on wheels weigh from five to twelve tons, while the portable shrines carried on shoulders weigh about one ton and a half. They make their way through the streets of the former capital, offering a gorgeous sight. They display a large variety of both Japanese and foreign paintings and traditional tapestries, turning into a genuine movable museum.

In the afternoon, the portable shrines carrying the three Guardian Gods of Yasaka shrine are transferred to a temporary abode in the centre of the town so that the deities might commune with the parishioners for a week. On July 24<sup>th</sup>, on their way back to the permanent abode at Yasaka shrine, the guardian deities make a halt at the shrine within the Imperial Gardens where they are met with food offerings, music and dance. The religious ritual at Yasaka shrine at midnight, with no light around, is really impressive. Finally, they take their places in the permanent abode waiting for the next *matsuri*.

*O-Bon*, the festival of the dead, namely ancestors’ worship, takes place from August 13<sup>th</sup> through 16<sup>th</sup>. It starts with lighting candles or kindling fires in front of the gates or at cemeteries, the light playing both the role of purifying the place and of guiding the souls to find their way home more easily.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> priests officiate individual ceremonies at home and cemeteries, and collective rituals at Buddhist temples. The souls of the dead are then entertained, the best known event being *Bon-odori* (“Bon dance”). Platforms are set up in parks, public squares or on the banks of the rivers, being surrounded by lighted lanterns. Men, women and children dance around them following the model of the professional dancers on the platforms.

The most famous dance in Japan is *Awa-odori* in Tokushima (in Shikoku Island). Here, almost each group of dancers has its own musicians. The comeliness of the dancing hands is specific of the Japanese.

Besides the professional dancers, there are women, men, and children dressed in short kimonos, called *hapi*. Their dances are more dynamic. After the parade of the dancers in front of the stands, the echo of the festival moves on to the streets, gathering young and old around the professional dancers and all of them do their best to keep to the rhythm of the dance.

On the last day of the festival, the souls of the dead are guided back to their world with light.

A festival that kept me in the streets for six evenings running – from August 2<sup>nd</sup> through the 7<sup>th</sup> – was *Neputa-matsuri* in Hirosaki (in Aomori prefecture). It takes place before harvesting and it originally aimed at getting over drowsiness lest it should affect agricultural activities. According to another theory, it originates in a huge lantern carried by itinerant musicians in order to entertain people so that they may put up more easily with the almost unbearable hot summer. In the beginning, the lanterns were carried on shoulders, but the competition between towns resulted in larger and larger lanterns which came to be carried on wheels. Nowadays they are lit inside and reach the height of eight meters and the width of fifteen meters in Hirosaki, and the height of twenty two meters in Goshogawara, near Hirosaki. The parade of the floats offers an impressive spectacle until late at night. The paintings on the walls of the floats – real works of art – feature mythological animals, legendary heroes, portraits of well-known actors.

*Danjiri-matsuri* in Kishiwada – Osaka, on September 14<sup>th</sup>, is an eye-arresting festival due to the intricate carvings on the outer walls of the *danjiri* (“parade floats”) which feature past fighting scenes and heroes, as well as animals. The *danjiri* weigh about four tons and reach up to almost four meters in height. The thick pulling rope is of about two hundred meters long and the pulling team is made of around one thousand people. The hauling through the town asks for strenuous effort and each person involved has his own responsibility, especially at turning corners. The sacred wands, *gohei*, at the top of the *danjiri*, which are considered to be channels for deities to use in order to come down and to participate in the festival, seem to keep a watch over the whole event.

*Danjiri-matsuri* starts at 6 o’clock in the morning with prayers for the safety observance of the festive event officiated at three important shrines in Kishiwada, and then the floats head for the central square of the town. Here there are prepared two thousand and eight hundred seats for the spectators, being considered the best place to see the procession of the floats. Done quickly to the beat of drums and shouts of the pulling team, corner turning is one of the most impressive elements of the festival. Inside each *danjiri* there are drummers, flutists, and personalities belonging to the respective parish.

The first parade through the town starts at 9:30 a.m. with the procession of children. From 1 to 5 there is another parade through Kishiwada. Afterwards, each *danjiri* makes for its own parish in order to be decked with about two hundred lanterns. At 7 o’clock in the evening all the lanterns are lit and the *danjiri* move

through the town again, at a lower pace, displaying their beauty against the dark sky.

On September 15<sup>th</sup> at 9 o'clock a.m. the floats enter one of the shrines, where they are purified, and then taken back to their permanent abode to wait for the following year's *danjiri-matsuri*.

The most famous agricultural festival is *Kanname-sai* at Ise-jingu. Ise shrine is made up of two compounds: Naiku, which dates back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, being dedicated to Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, and Geku, which dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century, being dedicated to Toyoukehime, the Goddess of Cereals. It is forbidden to take photos of both the main pavilions and of the rituals, except for very few of them. For instance, the chest carrying the sacred rice from the storehouse to the place of offering rituals can be photographed only from the side, without including the priests in the long procession. The rules of the shrine are very strict.

The rice given as an offering to Amaterasu is grown in special paddy fields, under the direct supervision of the priests and of the staff employed on purpose. Vegetables are also cultivated on plots laid out on purpose. The plates and bowls are burnt in the kilns of the shrine and used only once. The *sake* is brewed of a special kind of rice. The food is prepared according to ancient methods over a fire kindled by rubbing two sticks against each other.

*Kanname-sai* starts on October 15<sup>th</sup> in the centre of Ise. The procession of floats advances slowly and quietly as if they didn't want to disturb the souls of the two goddesses waiting for the food offerings. After the purification of the spectators and the rituals of food offering given to the Sun Goddess, the bales of rice straw symbolizing the whole year's crop are carried into the precincts of the shrine and purified by a priest.

On October 22<sup>nd</sup>, at *Jidai-matsuri* ("the Festival of the Epochs"), Kyoto's history unfolds in the streets of the former capital in reversed order, namely starting with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, back to the Heian Epoch (794-1184), considered to be the most glorious period of Japanese culture. Over two thousand participants in the procession that reaches almost two kilometers in length display costumes, hair styles and accessories reminding of important events and personalities – such as shoguns, samurai, famous aristocrats, the forerunner of the *Kabuki* Theatre, as well as Murasaki Shikibu – the author of the first novel of the world, *Genji Monogatari*, that came out at the very beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

*Kannazuki-sai* ("the month without *kami*"), known at Izumo shrine as *Kamiari-sai* ("the month with all *kami* around"), celebrates in mid-November the gathering of the *kami* all over the country in order to decide upon the fate of marriageable young people. As the guardian deity at Izumo is Okuninushi, who is said to watch over

marriage partners, he must be taken advice of in this essential rite of passage. The rituals of sending the deities to Izumo are very impressive and they can't have lost their significance as long as there are still young people who visit their local shrines in order to pray to the guardian *kami* and to ask him to approach Okuninushi-no-mikoto for their destiny. Some of the minor *kami*, such as household guardians, are said not to go to Izumo since they are supposed to keep protecting the hearth, the garden tools, etc.

There are nineteen rooms in the precincts of Izumo shrine dedicated to traveling deities. As with any other traditional festival, *Kamiari-sai* starts with rituals of purification, goes on with lots of religious rituals, the meeting of the deities included, and ends with sending *kami* back to their permanent abodes.

*On-matsuri* at Kasuga shrine in Nara has been performed uninterruptedly since 1136. It is a festival which keeps unaltered all the Shinto rituals, songs and dances belonging to the historical periods it has covered.

It starts on December 15<sup>th</sup>, at the large temporary abode in the centre of the town laid out on purpose for the purification of the priests and the spectators one day before the descent of the deity among the parishioners. The purification is carried out with bamboo leaves dipped into boiling water. There follow the dances of the *miko* ("shrine girls") who shake the bells and the sleeves of their kimono in order to invite the *kami* down among the parishioners.

A procession of priests makes for the temporary abode in order to purify the way and to prepare the transfer of the deity from his permanent abode, where, meanwhile, the rituals of food offerings reveal mastery of gestures. The following day, there are other food, music and dance offerings till midnight, when the deity is transferred to his temporary abode in a thrilling atmosphere of mystery. At the light of the moon and of the log that has been kindled in advance in order to purify the way, the priests clad in white carry through the woods the sacred spirit covered with white cloth. After a night's rest, the deity and the spectators are entertained with all the traditional dances Japan has witnessed along the historical periods. Then, the sacred spirit is taken back to his permanent abode in the same mysterious atmosphere.

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There are hundreds of other stories that could speak about the lively rhythms of *matsuri*, about such heartbeats of the Country of the Rising Sun, which could fill up several volumes. The space being limited here, I can only point out again that the cultural model brought forth by the long tradition of folk beliefs is as fresh as ever. It

does not place Japanese spirituality in an obsolete past, but transfers it into new coordinates – actual and present – and renders conspicuous Japan's cultural identity.

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