

SWEAT AND FIREWORKS: CAPTURING THE SACRED AT JAPANESE FESTIVALS

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Abstract: *This essay focuses on the journey of a sacred portable Shinto shrine, Ōtori Mikoshi, from Osaka Tenmangu Shrine to a river procession in Osaka and back during Tenjin Matsuri, one of Japan's three great festivals. Tenjin Matsuri, taking place on July 25, is known as a fire and water extravaganza that attracts over a million visitors each year, among them many professional and amateur photographers. We are here presenting results of fieldwork that extended over four years in an attempt to create a visual ethnography, to illustrate how ancient ritual practices are performed in contemporary Japanese society, and to explain how the festival becomes a temporary stage for the manifestation of the sacred, and for a display of traditional masculinity meant to appease the gods as well as ensure the welfare of the community. Matsuri, the Japanese festivals, are organized in order to provide entertainment both for the deities and the communities that celebrate and worship them, creating an extra-ordinary escape from the ordinary world we live in. Our work addresses the two entwined aspects of a Japanese festival: on one hand, the divine elements embodied by the rituals performed by priests and shamanesses at the main Shinto shrine, and the temporary one on the boat; on the other, the interaction of the participants with the sacred seen in their efforts to carry the mikoshi for four exhausting kilometers, and in their admiration of the fireworks offered to the deities. Unlike most matsuri photography, the photos presented here focus less on aesthetics and more on the meaning of their objects, the gestures, and the implied sounds.*

Keywords: Japanese, festival, matsuri, mikoshi, Tenjin

Performance, celebration, and photography

The names of thousands of deities are included in *Kojiki* (712), Japan's oldest written chronicle, and most of them are still worshipped today at numerous shrines all over the country. Japan boasts an impressive number of *matsuri*³ (festivals) that have religious roots

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³ Various internet sources (such as <https://www.nippon.com/ja/features/h00010/> or <https://www.jmstats.com/economic-effect-of-festivals-in-japan/> -- accessed on February 21, 2022—place the number of Japanese festivals somewhere between 100,000 and 300,000. The Dictionary of Japanese Matsuri and Annual Events (日本まつりと年中行事事典) describes approximatively 2000 events.

(mainly connected the indigenous set of beliefs known as Shinto), with extravagant displays of color, sound, and movement performed as a sacred offering taking place on almost any day of the year. The Japanese also enjoy categorizing things⁴, and events as important as matsuri cannot escape this tendency. This visual essay attempts at capturing the concepts of sacrifice and sacred as they are expressed and performed during Tenjin Matsuri, one of Japan's Three Great Festivals.

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 2000: 577). Tenjin Matsuri is celebrated each year on July 24 (the eve of the festival) and 25 at Osaka Tenmangu Shrine, a Shinto shrine located in the commercial center of Osaka. The matsuri is centered around the god Tenjin—a deity that became associated with a real historical figure, Sugawara no Michizane, towards the end of the 10th century. Sugawara no Michizane was an aristocrat who attained a high political position at a young age due to his scholastic abilities—a success that attracted the envy of his rivals and led to his eventual exile in Dazaifu, Kyushu. Michizane died in exile, and several years after his death a series of calamities affected the capital, the imperial family, and his political rivals, leading the population to believe that they were the result of Michizane's having morphed into a vengeful ghost. In 951 a religious ceremony with the purpose of appeasing his spirit was created at Osaka Tenmangu—the beginning of today's lavish displays of traditional art combined with religious belief and community activities⁵.

The contemporary festival includes a land procession with approximately 3,000 active participants, who dance, beat drums, and carry on their shoulders portable shrines weighing over two tons, followed by a river procession where the above-mentioned participants and their extravagant accoutrements take the deity on a pleasure trip on the river. The flamboyant parades, combined with an equally elaborate fireworks show, attract over a million visitors each year, and many of them are amateurs and professional photographers. The professionals usually manage to acquire special permission from either the shrine or one of the groups involved in organizing the festival, and as such have a much-coveted access to the best photography spots, but the amateurs are compelled to do research, gauge the most adequate place to be in order to take the desired shot (since the event is a very energetic

⁴ A list of “top three” places in Japan from various categories can be found here: <https://travel.rakuten.com/campaign/ranking/top3/> (accessed on February 18, 2022).

⁵ For more information on Tenjin Matsuri and its origins see Carmen Sapunaru Tamas, *Ritual Practice and Daily Rituals. An Introduction to the World of Matsuri* (Bucharest: Pro Universitaria, 2018), and *Beliefs, Ritual Practices, and Celebrations in Kansai* (Bucharest, Pro Universitaria, 2020).

occurrence, taking good photos of various significant moments in the same year may prove an elusive quest), and wait there for several hours under the torrid sun of the Japanese summer. Their efforts are rewarded by the Tenjin Photo Competition, organized annually by the Imperial Hotel in Osaka—a business closely associated with Osaka Tenmangu Shrine—where the judges are members of the groups in charge of Tenjin Matsuri, who offer matsuri memorabilia and boat rides for the next river procession to the winners.

We have been fortunate enough to obtain permission to follow the Ôtori Mikoshi Group on its matsuri route, in an attempt to document their sacred journey through the streets of Osaka, as well as understand the mechanisms that make men want to carry a two-ton portable shrine⁶ for four long kilometers on a hot and humid Japanese summer day. The Japanese festivals are popular subjects for photographers because they are lavish events that address all senses, where capturing the spectacular, the unusual, the visually pleasing does not require more than patience and endurance. However, not having at least a basic knowledge of the meaning and history of these performances may cause the photographer to ignore significant moments in favor of transient beauty—such as the efforts of taking quality shots of the fireworks while paying no attention to the rituals occurring under the rain of color and light.

The originality of our project consists in combining the research skills of an anthropologist with the technical and artistic skills of a professional photographer, initially hired by the Ôtori Mikoshi Group to create a record of the event, in order to put together an annotated chronicle: things as they happened, why they happened, and how, and what is the narrative that holds everything together.

Ritual and perception

The ritual performed inside a Shinto shrine represents the religious core of any matsuri—the moment of communion and communication between the human officiant and the divine beings who are being worshipped. The word “matsuri” derives from the verb “matsuru・奉る,” the respect form of the verb “to give/ offer,” which is why many practitioners define matsuri as the ritual of making offerings to being of the highest possible rank, the *kami* (Numabe & Motegi 2011: 4). The priests are obviously in possession of this specific knowledge, and in the case of Tenjin Matsuri, they do their best to impart the information. Starting at noon on July 25, a shrine representative explains each stage of the ritual and the accompanying performances to the people gathered

⁶ *Mikoshi* in Japanese, a ritual object modeled after the palanquins used by the aristocracy in the old times, which is used to take deities on a symbolic journey during their feast days.

to witness the celebration. Nevertheless, the color and light spectacle created as an offering to the gods is what attracts the attention of the onlookers, and few people, including those we interacted with, are able to explain what the rituals consist of, although the direct participants are aware of the fact that everything they do is dedicated to a divine being that is supposed to protect them and their community in the year to come. Tenjin Matsuri is centered around the god Tenjin under his human form as Sugawara no Michizane, whose presence is casually assumed by the local people who are more focused on the practical aspects of the matsuri than on the rituals leading to the sacred manifestation of the deity—as John Nelson puts it, the concept of “kami” is “‘enculturated’ rather than intellectualized” (1996: 27). During these busy couple of days in July, there is little time for contemplation, and people think more of what they must do than of why they have to do it (or for whom).

At present there are 26 active Kô (groups involved in organizing Tenjin Matsuri and all the performative events related to it), and the one we did research on is Ôtori Kô. Ôtori Mikoshi is the oldest *mikoshi* currently in use at Tenjin Matsuri, having been donated to the shrine in 1840 (according to records from 1845). Until the Gohôren (the main mikoshi from Osaka Tenmangu) was built in 1876, it used to host the spirit of Sugawara no Michizane; nowadays, it represents a temporary dwelling for Sugawara no Nomino Sukune, one of Michizane’s ancestors.

The journey of the Ôtori Mikoshi—the Shrine of the Phoenix—begins with the *shinrei igyo*, the symbolic transfer of the spirit of the deity from the innermost sanctum of the main hall onto a plum branch (the plum tree, its flowers and fruit are associated with Sugawara no Michizane due to a poem he apparently wrote when he was eleven, admiring the beauty of dark pink plum blossoms) and into the portable shrine. This is an example of what Helen Hardacre calls “animating the mikoshi”—moving sacred symbols from the innermost sanctuary into the mikoshi, “in a secret ceremony that must not be seen except by the immediate participants.” (2017: 501)

The priests and closest attendants wear masks because even their breath can pollute the deity; the attendants hold white sheets to protect the deity from the eyes of the onlookers, or maybe help them avoid a fate like Semele’s, the mortal destroyed by having looked upon the full divine glory of her lover Zeus.



Image 1. The spirit of the deity leaves the main shrine

Working for the Gods

Once Sugawara no Michizane/ the God Tenjin⁷ and his attendants (historically attested ancestors and other deities mentioned in the Japanese chronicles) are enshrined in their temporary abodes, the *mikoshi* are lifted high into the air by their carriers, in a salute to the shrine which shall remain empty (although no less sacred) until their return. Ôtori Mikoshi and Tama Mikoshi (a newer portable shrine, donated by Osaka Central Market), pictured below, are the last to leave the precincts of the shrine, following the groups of drummers and dancers who announce the coming of the deities.

⁷ Sugawara no Michizane, the main deity from Osaka Tenmangu Shrine and Tenjin Matsuri, is known as the God Tenjin, God of Thunder and protector of scholars. "The use of the term "tenjin"... predates the ninth century. In ancient China the expression "heavenly deities and earthly deities" (Tenjin chigi" 天神地祇) existed and subsequently in Japan the same characters were applied to the words "Amatsukami" and "Kunitsukami". (These names also mean heavenly kami and land kami, but have different meaning from the Chinese usage.) The Kanmu Emperor "worshipped the tenjin at Katano," and when envoys were sent to T'ang Dynasty China (kentōshi), prayers were made to the tenjin chigi for their safe journey. Tenjin were also worshipped in other regions in Japan besides the capital. All of these instances pre-date Sugawara Michizane's deification as Tenjin and even now at the shrine Kita-Shirakawa Gūsha venerates Tenjin as a deity of thunder and rain. However any mention of Tenjin belief is generally seen as a reference to the cult of Sugawara no Michizane after he acquired the characteristics of the conflated deity Tenman Tenjin." (Yonei Teruyoshi—*Encyclopedia of Shinto*)



Image 2. The gods are ready for departure

Image 3 captures the essence of the Japanese festivals: humans working for the gods. The Japanese gods are powerful and temperamental beings unconcerned with the mortal concepts of good and evil, who, when whimsically enraged, bring about earthquakes, typhoons, and plagues. As stated by Herbert Plutschow (1996: 16), “A deity or spirit can be both good and evil, beneficent or maleficent, depending, it seems, on the way it is treated by the human community, or depending on the way it was treated while alive,” meaning that they must be appeased with offerings and entertainment. In the hierarchy of offerings for the divine, human sacrifices occupy the highest spot, yet the practice has been discouraged for hundreds of years. In its stead, Japanese festivals provide pain and sweat: carrying two tons of wood, lacquer, and golden ornaments on one’s shoulders is a literally back-breaking enterprise, leaving the participants bruised, sore, and exhausted. Yet they do it year after year, to prove both their devotion to the deities protecting the country, and their masculine ability to do the same for their families. In shouts of encouragements and grunts of pain, the *mikoshi* passes under the torii, the Shinto gate that separates the sacred from the profane. Helen Hardacre describes the carrying of the mikoshi as an event closely related to a mystical trance: “Young men who bear the *mikoshi* are expected to manifest ecstatic behavior, as the Kami within the sacred palanquin whirls it about according to divine will and irresistible sacred power.” (2017: 475) However, such a typology is rare at Tenjin Matsuri, where both the ordinary carriers (those who join for the day only) and the regular members of the group manifest restraint and adhere to a strict schedule. The land and river procession must follow the decided timeline to the minute, because no event can be skipped, and all the groups must return to the shrine before midnight, which means there is little room for behavior otherwise common for a matsuri.



Image 3. Working for the gods

The land procession is an exquisite parade leading from the center of the festival, Osaka Tenmangu Shrine, to the riverside, during which one can admire three types of traditional dances, historical costumes, a giant drum incessantly beaten by six carefully selected and trained men, and of course the mikoshi. The river procession, on the other hand, is the climax of the ritual, taking place at the special moment between day and night, when the borders between the human and the divine world are fluid, and when the presence of the gods is signaled by the universal indicators of communication with the other world: special sounds and light. The boat carrying the Shrine of the Phoenix becomes a temporary Shinto shrine, where a *shinji* (Shinto ritual) is performed. In Image 4 a priest waves a *sakaki*⁸ branch decorated with white paper strips in order to purify the space where the ritual occurs. We are on one of the three boats commissioned by the Ôtori Mikoshi Group, and first in order of importance, because it is the one transporting divinity, the other two being for ordinary festival participants and *mikoshi* carriers.

⁸ Evergreen tree used in Shinto rituals



Image 4. Ritual purification

Image 5 shows the offerings presented to the deity, and the carriers admiring one of the most dazzling sunsets (July 25, 2019) in the history of the festival, a phenomenon, all the participants agreed, owed to the grace of the God Tenjin. The photo has been only minimally edited for light and clarity, as the true colors showering the sacred boat on that evening were even more spectacular than the fireworks that followed.



Image 5. The burning eye of the God of Thunder

A basic Shinto ritual includes five main stages: purification, presenting the offerings, prayer, dance, and the attendants paying their respects by symbolically placing a *sakaki* branch on the altar. Image 6 shows a *miko* (shrine maiden) in brief silent prayer after she had danced for the

entertainment of the sacred spirit ensconced in the brilliantly lit and decorated shrine in front of her. Ritually speaking, these moments, seldom captured by photographers not only because of lack of access, but also because they are less impressive than all the other things simultaneously occurring around them, represent the essence of the *matsuri* as the rare instances when direct communication with the divinity becomes possible. This particular image focusing on the shamaness and the object of her devotion manages to record an unlikely bubble of silence among the incessant sounds of the festival.



Image 6. Prayer and magic

As an anthropologist, I was interested in the contemporary performance of ritual, but the eye of the photographer was attracted to the combination of archaic and modern obvious in the tableau of a golden portable shrine floating under the steel and concrete bridges of Osaka.



Image 7. Under the bridges of Osaka

Fireworks have always fascinated both ordinary people and photographers, and there are many fireworks events that light up the Japanese evenings. In many cultures they are used to ward off evil spirits at the passing between years, but in Japan they are most common in summer, the time when the spirits of the departed are supposed to return for a brief symbolic reunion with their families. The Tenjin Matsuri fireworks are special, one of the offerings to the celebrated deities, that is why they are only released when the boats carrying the mikoshi pass by. The significance and role of fireworks are slowly becoming obsolete for the younger generations, yet their beauty is still very much appreciated both by the men (as seen in Image 8) and the gods to whom they are dedicated (Image 9).



Image 8. Offerings above and below



Image 9. Fireworks for the God of Thunder

The boat ride, with its solemn ritual and grand fireworks show, provides a respite for the mikoshi carriers, whose grueling work has not ended yet. The deity must be returned to the main hall, so immediately after landing they line up for a song that embodies the essence of their performance: sacrificing sweat and flesh for the gods, praying for peace and protection, and displaying themselves as “manly men” who can work for and defend their community. Despite the numbers (200 hundred carriers and 33 permanent members of the Ôtori Mikoshi Group), it is an almost intimate moment where the researcher and photographer are intruders, self-exiled to the edges of the stage as not to disrupt the dignity of the moment.



Image 10. The return of the Guardians of the Phoenix

Tenjin Matsuri ends when the mikoshi are taken back to their assigned places within the precincts of the shrine—a moment of exhilaration at the completion of yet another successful festival combined with the kind of bitter-sweet sadness I used to feel in January, dismantling the Christmas tree. One last greeting, led by the Head of the Ôtori Mikoshi Group (Image 11), to the God of Thunder is performed, and the world is ready to become again an ordinary place, where work is not accompanied by the sound of drums, and sweat is not lit by fireworks.



Image 11. Farewell to the gods

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