

# Cultural Performance Festivals in Japanese Settings: An Ethnographic Narrative Analysis and Interpretation (Part I)

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## Abstract

The influence of the socio-cultural, psycho-religious, and spiritual constructs upon Japanese urban and rural communities has long been increasing through their public engagement during annual tranquil and highly centered festivals. This study brings five integrated Japanese festivals into a reflexive analysis to highlight the centrality of individual agency and experience from an event-centered ethnographic perspective. The results suggest that the selected sites of cultural and practice experiences have been traditionally expressed by local communities (past and present) through their shared festivals. During the interplay dynamics of these shared events participants (mostly long-term residents) have significantly characterized, affirmed, and shaped their related communities' cherished identity narratives, memories, emotions, landscapes, and social (both visible and invisible) worlds. This translates into the perception of festivals in public spheres as timeless endowing the local communities with a sense of stability and continuity, as well as being agents for social cohesion and neighborhood economic regeneration. It is precisely in this respect that the architectural intentionality encourages local communities and spiritual communion, giving them simultaneously clues to highly salient socio-cultural as well as psycho-religious constructs in specific Japanese settings. This ethnographic study has, therefore, provided a fine interpretive tool for demonstrating how some of the salient (understood and shared) facets and contours of these shared events essentially connect participants to the construction of their identity, cultural being, and preservation of their traditions within specific settings.

**Keywords:** Cultural performance festivals, Ethnography, socio-cultural and psycho-religious forces, audience motivations and experiences, cultural networks and discourses, shrines, Japan.

## Introduction

Recent developments in the field of cultural anthropology have heightened the need for looking at community-based festival participants' human attitudes, behavior, expressiveness, and creative ingenuity from ethnographic and performance perspectives (Frost 2016; Leal 2016, to name but a few). A more in-depth understanding will emerge in this area through providing

a deeper reflexive understanding of several contextualized “communities and cultures based on their physical movements, sensory, awareness, storytelling, psycho-religious emotions, ethnicity, culture, and tradition making” (Landis and MacAulay 2017: xviii). Here, I focus particularly on five different types of integrated Japanese festival performances to highlight the centrality of individual agency and experience from an event-centered ethnographic perspective. The substantive concern is to determine how these so-called sites of cultural and practice experiences are traditionally expressed by local communities (past and present) and why they significantly characterize, affirm, and shape their related communities’ shared identity narratives, landscapes, and social (both visible and invisible) worlds.

The overarching themes of this discussion within the context of ethnographic events research involves the concept (and label) of “performance,” which specifically denotes “the defining mechanism of a culture, a way of showing cultural identity to outsiders and reaffirming it for the members of the society” (Landis and Macaulay 2017: 11). Factoring in this definition, this study emphasizes that “cultural performances” entail all “those events that create, highlight, or perpetuate a certain culture” (Landis and MacAulay 2017: 11; for further details, see Valentine and Matsumoto 2001), while “festival” should be understood herein as an “interaction between individual motivations and societal functions” (Gluckman 1982, reviewed by Hylland Eriksen 1995: 216). Thus, I attempt to demonstrate how such formulations of community festivals can be contextualized and analyzed in light of Schechner’s (2006) notion of performance as ritual, with its repetitive, intensifying, and liberating aspects.

### Methods and Data Analysis

The synthesis includes data gleaned chiefly from five Japanese settings, on varied dates between 2020 and 2022, using deep observation (paying attention to everything happening around me during the community festival), community participatory analysis, key informant interviews, contextualized conversations, and focus group discussions (Bernard 2006; Clair 2003; Stage and Mattson 2003) with ten Japanese families and six festival organizers/managers, as well as progressive contextualization, netnography (textual output of internet related fieldwork) and/or digital ethnography through social medias such as Zoom, WhatsApp, Line, and Skype (Kozinets 1997). The age of participants ranged from eighteen to sixty-five, with a typical age bracket of 35–44 to ensure that they were likely to provide meaningful responses about their motivations, behaviors, and ideologies. The evaluation of interviews, direct observations, and netnography was supplemented by secondary and historical sources, individual creative documents (official records, diaries, letters, autobiographies, photographs, and social media), visual narratives as presented in art and performative narratives as presented in festivals, and the digital records of the local museums. This consequently allowed me to better “investigate individuals’ [event] perceptions and attitudes [including preferences], and to construct a representation of the worlds in which they exist and interact, beyond the scope of quantitative research paradigms” (Jaimangal-Jones 2014: 40).

### Themes and Core Argument of this Study

Three basic inextricably interconnected components (aesthetics, experience, and presence

of a single local community) in contemporary event-centered ethnography practice are systematically brought together to achieve mutual intelligibility between the discourse about them in nature and the world and the goals of cultural approach and analysis. This task precisely implies the adoption of a cultural hermeneutics, an ethnographic analysis and interpretation of “how participants negotiate legitimate identities within specific spaces” (Jaimangal-Jones 2014: 41) and “how culture conditions people’s understanding of reality in a particular time and space” (Kanyoro 2002: 9). The very concept (and label) of festivals (*matsuri*) are specifically used herein to denote Japan at its best—the lighthearted side of Japanese culture. I argue that, through the five ritualized festivals in question, the sampled Japanese local communities ultimately display an architecture of performance space and place that stands between the visible and invisible worlds constructed in association with collective shared narratives and fond memories, past experiences and current practices. It is also demonstrated that the space and place become sacred merely because of community events that occur around them and the dynamics resulting from the renewal and continuity of traditions.

This core argument indeed translates into the perception of festivals in public spheres as timeless endowing the local communities with a sense of stability and continuity, as well as being agents for social cohesion and neighborhood economic regeneration. It is precisely in this respect that the architectural intentionality encourages local communities and spiritual communion, giving them simultaneously clues to highly salient socio-cultural and psycho-religious constructs in specific Japanese settings. I further suggest, in HenceReader’s terms, (1994: 187) that “the entire Japanese landscape is sacred either in actuality or potentially,” albeit the undeniable fact that Japanese local communities evolve now in the fragmented, untrammelled selves of consumer society.

## 1. Background: Defining Features of Japanese Festivals in Context

Let us begin by establishing at the outset that different genres of ritualized, ceremonial, and symbolic festivals (*matsuri*) held in many Japanese settings have long taken root as local communities have increasingly involved themselves as meaning makers and producers of cultural practices. It is not my intention here to analyze the historical context of these developments. Rather, in what follows I draw on my own and other ethnographers’ experiences to simply emphasize that, for reasons embedded in a local culture, such community-based festivals generally afford fluidity in the statuses of performers and audience in the least restricted regions (defined culturally and historically).

There is, to the best of my knowledge, a public knowledge in Japan of the subject matter of contextually shared festivals, which further perpetuate the myth that these community-based events deal with the past, present, and future. All this entails that there are several commonalities within the heritage communities scattered throughout a striking geographic variation. Many people come to participate in these collective experiences distinct from everyday life, as well as to socialize and help solidify the vast social, religious and

communications network of the region. In addition to this reason, however, more and more of them come each year to enthusiastically celebrate and reaffirm their Japaneseness (tradition and cultural heritage), and the festivals often appear on broadcast news. It is recognized that the local authorities have played a major role in creating the publicly visible, self-affirming Japanese ethos of earlier times. Perhaps that is the reason why most of these public “festivals are judged (by some) to provide multicultural color in the inner-city or authentic cultural heritage in the countryside, often alongside quantifiable economic impact” (Leal 2016: 569; for a comprehensive review of event-related studies incorporating ethnography to date, see Holloway et al. 2010).

Apparently, there is a correlation between the prominence of the local community on the festival agenda and the number of participants who come to “dwell in unity.” Thus, principal festival actors (primary performers) often perform the (ritual) actions and words that form the symbolically significant semiotic texts (*script*) appropriate to their particular performative-cultural event. Closer inspection of the main performers in these dynamics revealed that the high visibility of their activities at these communal events strengthens participants’ psychological capacity to publicly affirm themselves. Suffice it to ethnographically emphasize here that it is precisely “those charged moments of the saying and doing that are at the heart of this stage of the process” (Valentine and Matsumoto 2001: 76). Throughout this article, therefore, one must keep in mind that historical Japanese cultural festivals (*matsuri*), in the best sense of the term, have long been in Japanese settings, as elsewhere in the world, firmly established as repetitive entertainment events in which people dance and play music together, eat specific food, and view beautiful scenery. Given this atmosphere of enthusiasm and proliferation, it is unsurprising that one has increasingly observed as many as 300,000 *matsuri* held annually throughout Japan to encapsulate, even delineate, the heritagization of festive cultures and cultural diversity, especially in regions deemed rich in culture and heritage tourism.

So far, however, there have been in existing scientific literature on festivals four main underlying reasons why Japanese people are attracted to and passionate about specific community-based festivals with religious, spiritual, and seasonal backgrounds, among others. The first reason is people’s intention to pray for various wishes through rituals or codified actions and proxemics, while simultaneously adding weight and importance to the existence of the local community. In addition, hindsight makes it easy to think that these and other periodically small and elaborated local festivals are, by their heterogeneity, instrumental in strengthening people’s unity and harmony, fostering community engagement and identity, as well as creating, highlighting, educating, and spreading or perpetuating knowledge about the culture, heritage, and religious beliefs in specific areas. Because of this subtle discernment of ritualized festival objectives, various beliefs were created in the form of *matsuri* in various parts of Japan.

Of course, for a variety of more or less connected reasons, including the influence of the postmodern cohesive organizational culture, one may also find today in many Japanese settings the so-called “invented traditions,” which are deliberately created to respond to particular socio-cultural circumstances and embrace innovative ritualistic actions that naturally deviate from

long-lived replicative traditions. On the level of conceptual and empirical knowledge, however, it is also worth noting that these and other contextually invented and embedded traditions decisively advance the scope of anthropological and performance studies. The present synthesis instead focuses much on what Abraham very interestingly described as a folk performance, denoting the management of social misalignment (Tuleja 1997: 6, reviewed by Landis MacAulay 2017: 184).

Secondly, many (perhaps most) Japanese practitioners seemingly become enthusiastic about performance-based traditions as a benign source of motivation to alleviate daily stress, resentment, and anxieties (through the veneration of sacred relics, either as symbols or pledge. Community-based festivals are highly regarded as a good opportunity to release negative energy within one all at once. The third noteworthy explanation is, as I argue later in this article, that the local populace, in most cases, can experience (both individually and collectively) an unusual atmosphere in performing their community-based festivals deliberately in time and space. According to Nikkei (2015), the most common reason for participating in the festival is that people like the atmosphere of the festival, as they can experience and touch many non-ordinary things such as watching fireworks, wearing *yukata* (the summer *kimono*), and eating at food stalls.

The final reason points to the national character of the Japanese people reported in much literature. It surely does seem enough here to merely suggest that since Japan is a polytheistic country, there is not much prejudice. It is observed, at almost every festival, that the behavior of local participants instead showed that Japanese people rather have a naturally high tolerance for religion and, hence, do not care much about what kind of religion is behind the festival performance. Perhaps, indeed, they show interest in a variety of festival-type events. It is equally possible that they show interest not only in local festivals, but also in various events of foreign origin, such as Christmas, Halloween, and Valentine's Day. Be that as it may, there has long been a common consensus that most, perhaps all, Japanese often celebrate Christmas and New Year, visit a shrine when a child is born, hold a wedding ceremony in a church, and request a funeral at a temple. More commonly in this single society orientation, it is also important to underscore the extent to which the concept (and label) of *matsuri* (festival) in Japan has significantly shifted over decades from a single event of making wishes through prayers based on folk religion to an integral and indispensable part of people's lifestyles.

The focus of community-based festivals observed in all their forms throughout Japan was underscored again by Takenori Ogoshi, who, based on a type of auto-ethnography (Seymour-Smith 1986), cogently divided them into two main categories, depending on their purpose and history. The first distinguishes festivals with a strong element of commonality, enjoyment, and bustle, and, the other, those with a strong element of religion, tranquility, and prayer. Leaving the general trend, however, he added, from a native anthropological lens (Strathern 1987), that these two forms of festival have recently appeared to be blended and have seemingly changed into one pattern of community events (Koetu 2022). Viewing historically, one could, therefore, argue that these remarkable genres of folk tradition and other activities concerning folk beliefs function (especially among the agrarian communities practicing rice farming) as a driver of social unit through diverse steps of social and religious rituals.

More significantly, however, my pilot cross-sectional study highlighted how these shared events embody many of the standard ritualistic components found in the festival repertory, including features unique to the particular area and its cultural circumstances, as well as the three types of audiences: “central audience” (physically present natives), “bystander audience” (visitors and ethnographers), and “cultural audience” or a more general, implied audience that participates spiritually in the festival (Toelken 1979: 108–109). One matter is certain from more recent depictions: “Interrogating [the] festival setting has yielded insights into how people’s sense of their own identity is closely bound up with their attachment to place, and the sense of place may contribute to the shaping of individuals [and communities]” (Derret 2003, reviewed by Aung 2020: 149, bracketed text by the author). It is thus more productive to note that it is precisely within these festivals and other related shared events that various skills, techniques, and traditions are handed down through generations.

Having provided this background, I next consider some of the salient play aspects and contours of five Japanese festivals involving folk productions, and make a case for their importance and implication in terms of local community engagement (or their commonalities within the tagging rituals) on a voluntary basis. As complex multiple, and dynamic cultural products, however, these selected five community-based festivals should not be taken to represent “ideal types” or an approach to a classification of Japanese ritualized festivals. They are instead offered herein as examples of differing festival performances in the immediate vicinity of the frequently visited Japanese settings, and they are meant only to be suggestive. My analysis of them herein is basically undertaken in light of Valentine’s four steps for evaluating performance-centered cultural events: (i) self-reflection, (ii) cultural and historical explanation related to the performance event in situ, (iii) identification of the places where intersections and overlaps occur among the festival’s atmosphere, audience, performance, their roles, and the highlights of the saying and doing at the heart of the ceremony or performance, and (iv) reflection on the learning experience of the cultural performance (Valentine 2002, reviewed by Landis and MacAulay 2017: 37). For the purposes of description and analysis, I will also, wherever it is necessary, take into account some spheres of influence, such as personal histories (including the experience, education, and memories) that brought participants to their respective festival, cultural histories of the people who created the rituals and chronological influences on the performance event.

## 2. Case Study 1: Misogi Festival in Kikonai (Hokkaido)

The Misogi Festival (or Shinto traditional Kanchu Misogi ritual) is famous in Kikonai— a small fishing town located in the southwest of Hokkaido and surrounded by the Tsugaru Channel and beautiful mountains. Every year its quintessential value means that it is often featured on TV and other media as a seasonal event. Historically, this festival is also associated with the Samegawa Shrine (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2) located at the foot of Mt Yakushi. This is perhaps the reason why it is held annually from January 13th to 15th in the precincts of the Samegawa Shrine and on Misogi Beach. It is reported that in 1624 during the Edo period



Figure 1.1 A bird's eye view of the Samegawa Shrine

Source: Hokkaido Kikonai Tourist Information <https://uu-hokkaido.com/corporate/kikonai.shtml>



Figure 1.2 The Interior view of the Samegawa Shrine

Source: Hokkaido Kikonai Tourist Information <https://uu-hokkaido.com/corporate/kikonai.shtml>

(1603–1837), Genhiro Kono Kaga no Kami, the head of the Matsumae clan, built a small shrine on the banks of the Same River to bring good fortune in their battles. The deity of prayer is the life of princess Tamayori, the mother of Emperor, Jimmu, who was the first Emperor of Japan. The name Samegawa comes from a pun on the phrase “a river where a goddess helps.”

From Kikonai JR Station, one first goes through Furusato no Mori Park, then climbs to the observatory of Mt. Yakushi, and finally goes down the course through Samegawa Shrine. A direct observation of the Shrine showed that stone lanterns were lined up on both sides of the approach from the first torii gate, and the wide precincts were clean and well-maintained. From the second torii gate, the approach to the shrine and the right hand side, there was an Inari shrine in the precincts. Theories about the origin of the Misogi Festival vary. However, the most consistent evidence is that the birth of the Misogi Festival dates back to 1831. Readers should infer (if past evidence is any guide) that its shortened version refers to a Shinto Priest of Samegawa and that its name derives from the performance of harvest and fishing events. More precisely, festival participants pray for a good harvest from the local fields and a big catch from the great fast flowing Tsugaru Straits between Honshu and Hokkaido. It should be noted in passing that this well-known Shinto traditional purification ceremony is also held in the region in conjunction with fireworks shows, food festivals, and other events at Kikonai Town.

The historical and spiritual background of the Misogi Festival—labelled unusual test of endurance and ablution—bears traces of one striking story. Early in the morning of January 15, 1831, the Shinto priest of the Samegawa Shrine reportedly received an omen in a dream that he should cleanse the sacred body of the deity. Thereafter, he immediately went to the Samegawa River, which flowed directly beneath the shrine. When the priest arrived at the river, he broke the ice that was on the river and bathed his body in the cold water to purify himself. Later, precisely when he held the sacred object of the shrine in his arms and looked toward the shore, he was astonished to see a large shark struck by the waves at the mouth of

the river, and on its back was the figure of a beautiful woman dressed in white. Believing the woman to be a holy messenger of the gods, the Shinto priest then repeatedly bathed in the frigid sea with the sacred object. However, by the time he tried to grasp the woman, he realized that she had already gone, and the large shark at the mouth of the river had gone upstream and disappeared into a small swamp.

Since then, however, the village community reportedly continued, remarkably, to experience good harvests and a good catch of fish, overcoming, of course, the so-called Great Tempo Famine (1833–1844) that affected Japan during the Edo Period. In a very real sense, the lifestyles of the local populace in Kikonai became prosperous, highlighting the Shinto priest's deed and charms. Given this undeniable reality, four young men called *Goshusha* finally began to visit Samegawa Shrine every year from January 13 and bathed in cold water all day to purify their bodies. On January 15, they would jump into the extremely cold waters of the Tsugaru Straits with the four sacred objects representing the Shinto gods *Bettou*, *Benzaiten*, *Yama no Kami*, and *Inari* in their arms to pray for good fishing and a good harvest over the year. Retaining traces of 19<sup>th</sup> century local mysticism, these beliefs in the body's participation for a good harvest and successful fishing activities are consequently registered as deeply in the practitioners' bodies as in their imagination. In view of this complex of identities and activities associated with the local community, this ritualized festival has, therefore, been handed down from generation to generation.

During this ritualistic process, overhearing conversations and engaging with participants also revealed insights into individuals' perceptions concerning the fact that a traditional event in Kikonai town has constantly maintained a modicum of secrecy, denoting the religiosity of the local community praying deeply for a good catch and a good harvest. It has been known for some time that the god of the festival is specifically called *Tamayorihime-no-mikoto*. Similarly, it is reported that the main deity of the Samegawa shrine—built at the mouth of the river—was *Tamayorihime-no-mikoto*. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the name of the river was changed to *Sa* (meaning with “help”), with *Onna-gawa* designating “river.”

The Misogi Festival spans two days and melds two forces of collective religious action together. It is evident from my direct observations that its ceremonial activity seems to contain certain basic components. Each of them can be interpreted for the symbolically expressed meaning that is embodied in it. The first day of the festival (January 15) requires that four principal practitioners (*gyoshusha*) stay in the precincts of the shrine and practice the bathing in cold water (*mizugori*), at the Misogi Beach, with only loincloths on. On their stage space for this religious festival, they then kneel, fold their arms, and endure the cold water that hits their backs. During the second day (January 16), an integral part of the ceremony, there is a “Misogi Parade” by the principal performers and related festival participants towards Misogi Beach, where the four ascetics will also actively and enthusiastically participate in the dynamics of the shared religious festival (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2). A great number of participants often shudder with coldness and emotion when they see the water of the mountaineering ascetics.

Unsurprisingly, it appears that these two sequences of performance actions generate, at both individual and collective levels, a powerful feeling of intimacy (see Figure 2.3). In a sociological sense, therefore, one might state that this shared sense of enacted community thus binds all





Figure 2.1 Four ascetics enthusiastically and spiritually performing ritual practices in the cold water during the Misogi Festival

Source: Hokkaido Kikonai Tourist Information  
<https://uu-hokkaido.com/corporate/kikonai.shtml>



Figure 2.2 Four ascetics going toward Misogi beach to perform ritual practices in the cold water during the Misogi Festival

Source: Hokkaido Kikonai Tourist Information  
<https://uu-hokkaido.com/corporate/kikonai.shtml>



Figure 2.3 Photo souvenir of main actors in the dynamics of the Misogi Festival

Source: Hokkaido Kikonai Tourist Information  
<https://uu-hokkaido.com/corporate/kikonai.shtml>

the participants to each other through local suffering from cold water. In light of Landis and MacAulay (2017: 43), it could be stated in this specific context that the concept of ceremonially co-experiencing the physical and emotional suffering of the cold water because of the *Tamayorihime-no-mikoto* “becomes part of the repertoire of the social imaginary (shared vision) joining this community together through common beliefs and the efficacy of devotional action.” In a very real sense, this reflects Turner’s notion of a community as a “felt reality,” simply because this affective community is mutually created by participants out of their “beliefs and binds them together through sensory experience and deep feelings” (Noyes 1995: 466).

Following the ritual climax, there is a sense of palpable intimacy, or so to say, “a strong sense of solidarity and affiliation” (Turner 1974), as well as cherished memories among the participants, which binds the main actors and everyone else to each other in venerating the god *Tamayorihime-no-mikoto*. After being involved in the *communitas* (an emotional and

spiritual experience) characterizing an integral part of the ceremony, the participants then return to the Samegawa shrine with the procession and report that they have safely cleansed the sacred bodies. It should be apparent that all those present at the surroundings of the shrine are also reenacting and meditating upon the purification. While the “Cold Misogi Festival” is held tents selling local products are lined up in Misogi Square, and performances such as *Misogi Taiko* and the *Misogi Soran Flame Dance* are held. In addition, there are *mochi* pounding, *mochimaki* (rice cake throwing), and sales of buckwheat noodles (*miso-gisoba*) and sacred sake, making this festival a very popular event.

How do we account for the Misogi festival, its historical background, and its relation to the Samegawa Shrine? First of all, it can be stated that the Misogi festival ultimately represents the way practitioners endure the cold water for the sake of one’s body’s purification. Fundamentally, Misogi represents a Shinto practice of ritual purification in which the body is cleansed through bathing in water. Most of them are performed within the shrines or temples themselves, although there are one or two others where participants enter rivers. However, what makes the Misogi festival at Kikonai different from other related existing (naked) festivals is that it is quite possibly the only one which is carried out in the sea. It also involves human behavior as one can, through its performance, identify participants’ socio-cultural, psycho-religious and spiritual behaviors. Furthermore, it is a more constructive to consider physical movement as part of the Misogi festival, reflecting the religious views of the local community that holds this ritualized festival. So, the upshot of all this is that, the overall picture of the festival can be clearly grasped from the fact that four pairs of sacred objects are offered during the Misogi festival. When the Misogi Festival is over, principal actors and participants return to the precincts, which are sacred and treated as a place of sharpening for a certain period of time when the festival is held. In this way, as specified earlier, the apparent significance of the existence of the Misogi Festival reflects the sincere desire of the participants for stability at the site. Hence, one finds that the real leitmotif dominant is *Tamayorihime-no-mikoto*, who mostly elicits the narrative and symbols associated with him.

It transpired in interviews with long-term local residents that the Misogi festival brings participants into one belief in the gods. They equally indicated the subtle role played by this ritualized event in strengthening participants and ensuring the future stability of their local community. In reminiscing about the past, for example, one key informant commented:

There are many festivals related to shrines all over Japan. It is an undeniable fact that festivals inherently reflect people’s history and background, and are transmitted across generations, potentially influencing or healing descendants long after the fact. However, one should infer that the Misogi festival referred to here has notably a history of 190 years. This implies that without the custom and purpose of people believing in the deity, the festival would have declined long ago. However, the fact that my local community still needs the Misogi festival even after more than 100 years ultimately shows that our faith in the gods is still alive and well even after all these years.

The informant’s individual sentiment and its empirical corroboration, therefore, suggest how tradition or authenticity (including the concept of cultural particularity), rather than

aesthetics and style, are more applicable to the tenants of the Misogi festival. Onlookers who are lucky enough to be splashed by waters are also believed to be blessed with eternal happiness.

### 3. Case Study 2: Konomiya Hadaka Festival in Inazawa city

Officially known as *Naoishinji*, the “Konomiya Hadaka Festival” reported here represents one of the three most “bizarre” festivals in Japan performed in the context which can be loosely labeled calendrical festivals. “Konomiya” designates the name of a shrine in Inazawa city, while the Japanese term “Hadaka” literally means “naked.” Listed as an intangible folk cultural asset by Aichi Prefecture, this ritualized festival is held every year on the 13th day of the first lunar month. According to the Konomiya archives (2022), the origin of the festival dates back to about 1,250 years ago, when the Owari provincial governor prayed at Konomiya Shrine for the exorcism of evil spirits to ward off epidemics.

During the Konomiya Hadaka festival, thousands of naked men in *sarashi* loincloths and white *tabi* gather around the Owari Okunitama shrine (see Figure 3). The Konomiya area is often filled with festive excitement. A key aspect of this festival is the space that its participants create, while struggling with each other on the approach to the Konomiya shrine in an attempt to touch the godman called *Shinotoko* and, hence, get rid of their bad luck. At a more individual level, however, men and women, young and old, who cannot be ritually and temporally naked, are often invited to write their names and ages on a piece of cloth called *Naoi-gire* with their wishes and tie it to a bamboo called *Naoi-sasa*. Then, the naked men in groups carry the *Naoi-sasa* and run into the precincts of the shrine to dedicate to it with their wishes. This is the approximate flow of this festival.



Figure 3 Participants of Konomiya Hadaka festival

Source: Aichi Now-Official Site for Tourism Aichi

<https://www.aichi-now.jp/en/spots/detail/229/>

When asked about the age group representing the core of the festival, the 2015 Nikkei survey identified 65.2% of respondents in their 30s, 44.4% in their 40s, and 40.7% in their 20s. It was clear from interviews the large numbers of men in their 30s and 40s—who are in the prime of their working lives—used to participate in the Konomiya Hadaka festival. It has often been noted that these people regard the festival as a once-a-year big moment in which they can be the main characters, enthusiastically releasing all the power, stress, and resentment embodied in them. More importantly in this Shinto ritual is the fact that naked men engage themselves in a fierce struggle over a *Shinotoko*, who is chosen through prayer and ritualistic ceremonies. There are sufficient reason, then, to assert that this action is based on the common longstanding belief that touching the *Shinotoko* will help one to get rid of bad luck, in addition to their prayers offered to the gods for various wishes. On the surface, however, participants display special feelings toward the festival because they can experience a different atmosphere than usual. Apparently they combine the “far way” with the “deep within”, and participate with nostalgic introspective remembering a shared past. In a sense, one can, using an anthropological lens, depict here “a potent empirical package to combine humanistic perspectives on learning and maturation” (Peacock 2002: 51).

The Konomiya Hadaka festival is usually very crowded during the daytime, with food stalls lined up along the approach to the shrine and around the shrine. Even people who do not have a deep emotional attachment to the festival and aging persons who are unable to attend can enjoy the Konomiya Hadaka festival.

#### 4. Case Study 3: Ichinomiya Tanabata Festival

Ichinomiya City in Aichi Prefecture has long been famous for textiles, and many families used to run textile factories. Among the several festivals held in Ichinomiya City, the Ichinomiya Tanabata Festival—also known as *Orimono kanshasai* (Thanksgiving Festival for Textiles)—is apparently one of the most spectacular (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2). The story of the four-day Ichinomiya Tanabata Festival goes back to 1956, when it was first held in the region and then faced the overwhelming task of staying active and productive. In what follows, I shall not go into the details of its contours. It suffices to emphasize at the outset that this apparently simple thought was the subtle seed that slowly developed into the actual Ichinomiya Tanabata Festival.

Despite its short history, however, the Ichinomiya Tanabata event reportedly attracts more than one million visitors every year. Essentially, it is performed for a two-fold aim: the first is to thank the god of textiles and promote the textile industry, and the second purpose is to pray for the development of Ichinomiya city. History indeed suggests that Ichinomiya city was named after the Masumida shrine—the most prestigious shrine in Owari Province—where *Yorozuhata Toyoakitsushi hime no Mikoto*, the god of textiles, is reportedly enshrined. However, it is not quite certain, according to the Kouekizaidanhoujin ichinomiyajibasangyou fashion design center, that the Ichinomiya Tanabata Festival is related to this shrine. Evidently, the old pottery excavated from Yayoi period (c. 300 BCE–c. 250 BCE) sites nevertheless confirm that the area



Figure 4.1 Participants at Ichinomiya Tanabata Festival

Source: Aichi Now-Official Site for Tourism Aichi  
<https://www.aichi-now.jp/en/spots/detail/229/>



Figure 4.2 Participants at Ichinomiya Tanabata Festival

Source: Aichi Now-Official Site for Tourism Aichi  
<https://www.aichi-now.jp/en/spots/detail/229/>

around Ichinomiya was used in the textile industry, which was quite advanced at that time. Hundreds of years later, during the Heian Period (794–1185), it is surmised that silk fabrics were actively woven in the area. Although the textile industry has been drastically declining in recent years, it is readily apparent that Ichinomiya has still been supported by this festival for textiles.

The second aim of the Ichinomiya festival appears to be common in festivals created in the modern era. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, as the Pacific War intensified, Ichinomiya City was hit by two US air raids in July 1945, as many textile factories had been switched to munitions factories. Consequently, Ichinomiya City lost approximately 80% of its urban area, including the Masumida Shrine, the train station, the police station, and factories. Therefore, the Ichinomiya Tanabata festival, established in 1956, barely ten years after the aforementioned horrific air raids, may have been regarded as a commercial festival to boost the recovery of the Ichinomiya city from the war, and, hence, ensure the promotion of its economic growth in the future.

The term “Tanabata” has various origins. According to the Kyoto Jinushi Shrine (n.d.), however, it encompasses a combination of three elements, including (1) the Japanese ritual of *Tanabata*; (2) the legend of *Orihime* and *Hikoboshi*, and (3) *Kikoden*, which reportedly originated from China. Some defining features of these elements deserve preliminary comments here. First, the concept of Tanabata specifically denotes an event in which women weave kimonos to pray for a bountiful autumn harvest and to cleanse the people. Second, it is very likely that the legend of Orihime and Hikoboshi instead designates a story created in China about two gods, namely Vega who is believed to have governed sewing work, and Altair, who is said to have governed agriculture, and who shine brightest across the Milky Way on July 7. Finally, one should be aware that the concept of Kikoden here actually entails a custom to pray for improvement in weaving and sewing in honor of Vega. Taken together, these elements and many other striking stories, therefore, suggest a strong connection between

textiles and Tanabata, which has long made the Ichinomiya festival a perfect fit for Ichinomiya as a textile town.

Much more can be stated on these matters, but for the purposes of the present analysis, two flexible points in particular stand out. The first is that the organizers of the Ichinomiya festival can invite attractive guests to entertain the festival congregation. During the 2015 Ichinomiya textile festival, for example, a special Disney medley was conducted and Mickey Mouse and his friends visited Ichinomiya. It was metaphorically reported that “Sea and sky melt together in this fantastical design.” Thereafter, both a famous singer and “dancing hero,” Yoko Oginome and a famous Japanese actor, Hiroshi Tachi, were invited to the Ichinomiya textile festival in 2018 and 2019, respectively. During the period of fieldwork, I found that participants’ appraisals thus triggered an emotional response (satisfaction) that in turn generated a coping response (behavioral intentions) to maintain or increase their festival satisfaction levels.

The second feature relates to cultural and behavioral patterns. Recently, Ichinomiya City set in motion a policy called “From a Textile Town to a Cosplay Town,” which aimed to make the city a place for disseminating cosplay culture. In order to reinforce this culturally-based project, it is reported that the city has adapted its parade for the Ichinomiya Tanabata Festival. It transpired in interviews and contextualized conversations that this initiative relies in the acute awareness of the drastic decline of the textile industry in Ichinomiya City. This visible aspect of the experience is more significant to the foregoing discussion because it implies that, although the new textile technology is very advanced, it is readily apparent that the local populace still finds a subtle need to increasingly pass on the old textile technology to future generations. Not only that but it could also be stated that the cosplay, to which the city has turned its attention, has been gaining recognition remarkably in recent years. Practically, Ichinomiya City holds seminars and workshops, assists with fabric purchases, and even offers advice on costumes through this project. During fieldwork, main actors and participants indeed acknowledged that through the Ichinomiya textile festival, the city then provides them with a decidedly urban space to present to the large crowd the cosplay costumes that everyone has skillfully made. From a marketing perspective, this further reflects the acknowledgement that “the milieu in which festivals operates also adds value to the core product and can increase festival satisfaction (Robinson and Clifford 2012).

One subtle conclusion that emerged from a micro-analysis of the above characteristics and efforts of the Ichinomiya festival organization is that the history of the festival and that of the local community is intertwined. In this particular case, however, “textile” readily appears to be the foundation of Ichinomiya citizens’ lived experiences and struggles. Obviously this is understood as the *raison d’être* for the Ichinomiya Tanabata festival’s large acceptance and popularity over decades within and outside the region. Even those with just a passing acquaintance with the recent history of the Ichinomiya Tanabata festival will know that by the 2000s its character and organizational patterns had undergone considerable change. As matters stand today, however, the Ichinomiya Tanabata festival has arguably provided a possibility for the reestablishment of native textile industry. In this way, it is evident that the collaboration between the traditional textile industry and the new popular culture cosplay will increasingly help to enliven and enrich the Ichinomiya City, making it a sustainable city. Recent

statistics show that many regions today experience issues of depopulation. Thus, it seems very likely that the Ichinomiya textile festival proves a particularly fruitful example that can inspire other regions to review their own festivals, making them connected and adapted to the essence of their respective cities' tradition-based organizational patterns.

#### 5. Case Study 4: Kuniumi Festival on Awaji Island

Here, I focus on the theme of festivals based on myth, which were originally categorized as celebrating religion, tranquility, and prayer. My intention is to highlight some changes by comparing the old connotations of festivals based on myths with the current situation. It is recognized that Japanese mythology, which used to be told by priestesses and storytellers, aimed to encourage the listeners (mostly village populations) to practice the important rituals frequently for the sake of their sociological and psycho-religious lives. It was recognized that in this way the local powerful families performed significant festivals based on myths to particularly show off their ruling power, and the myths themselves served to motivate the local populace to actively participate in the required ritual practices (Sakae 2017).

Awaji Island is a large island in Hyogo Prefecture covering an area of approximately 593 km<sup>2</sup>. Recently, the number of hotels and tourist spots on the island has been increasing. The Akashi Kaikyo Bridge connecting Honshu and Awaji Island is the world's largest suspension bridge. Another striking feature of Awaji Island is the significant role it has long played in the Japanese mythology as partly recorded in the *Kojiki*, an ancient chronicle written in the 700s (see Figure 5).



Figure 5 “Searching the Seas with the Heavenly Spear,” painted by Kobayashi Eitaku dating from the late 19th century.

Source: Awaji Island Kuniumi Association

In this mythology, Awaji Island is identified as the first land in Japan. Both the gods of man and of woman, Izanagi and Izanami, are thought of as having given birth to the land of Japan, made up of eight large islands, with Awaji Island being then the first-born land. The mythical sequences of the creation of Japan here are striking. It transpires that before giving birth to the eight large islands, the two deities stood on the Ama-no-Ukihashi Bridge and churned the sea with a sacred spear. Onokoro Island was then formed by the tide that dripped off the spear as it was being pulled up. Thereafter, the heavenly *mihashira* was erected on this Onokoro Island, giving birth to Ohachi Island. From the perspective of folklore genre, it has widely been believed that Onokoro Island is Awaji Island.

Historically, the Kuniumi festival held annually on Awaji Island is based on the above-outlined creation myth. Altogether, the festival itself is framed on three main events. The first is a performance of the Japanese myth in dance. In this vein, efforts are often made by participants to create and perform *Kagura* (Shinto music and dance), mythological plays, mythological recitations accompanied by the 25-string koto, and picture-story shows based on the “Kuniumi Myth” at places on the island that are associated with the myth. The second is *Awaji Ningyo Joruri*, a nationally important intangible cultural property that was handed down 500 years ago. Its artistry is highly acclaimed worldwide (National Governor’s Association 2012). The third event includes the performance of a *danjiri*, during which a portable shrine float is pulled around during shrine festivals. Essentially, the *danjiri* of Awaji Island are usually made of five layers of red futon (bedding), decorated with gorgeous ornaments and embroidery, and paraded around the island (See Figure 6.1 and 6.2).

More importantly, the Awaji Island Kuniumi Association specified that Japan’s three major myths put forward in literature, namely (1) *Takachiho*, the “Hyuga Myth”, (2) *Izumo*, “The Myth of the Yielding of the Country,” and (3) *Awaji*, “The Myth of the Birth of the Country” were all brought together into a performance setting at Izanagi Shrine on Awaji Island (Awatabi, 2021). Thus, it is interesting to realize the extent to which the Kuniumi festival is held at the Awaji Island to pass on myths and traditions and has an aspect of local revitalization. While originally myth-based festivals were political and religious in scale, one can argue that today they ultimately represent a strong element of hedonism and the passing on of tradition and folklore culture.

As matters stand today, however, it can be further stated that the Kuniumi festival is increasingly expanding its scale by collaborating with myths of other cities, attracting visitors simultaneously from within and outside of the region. Perhaps one major change here points to the folk performing arts which have thus far been considered as a local resource that remarkably contributes to the revitalization of the local economy (Watanabe 2013). In this connection, however, some informants were concerned about the fact that the country has been using the Kuniumi festival more for commercial purposes than for religious ones. Other interviewees attributed the reason for this change in the meaning of festivals to changes in Shintoism. Retrospectively, this change was probably most noticeable shortly after World War II, when the Government Headquarters (GHQ/SCAP) drastically changed Japanese education. Until then, Shinto was taught in Japanese schools based on the idea that the emperor was a god, and, hence, Shinto was something not to be learned but to simply believe in.





Figure 6.1 The Izanagi-Jingu Shrine

Source: Awaji Island Kuniumi Association



Figure 6.2 A portable shrine float that is pulled around during the Kuniumi Festival

Source: Awaji Island Kuniumi Association

[https://www.kuniumi.or.jp/en/01\\_history.html](https://www.kuniumi.or.jp/en/01_history.html)

After World War II, however, the GHQ made the emperor a symbol of the state rather than a god as previously thought. As a result, Shinto almost disappeared from the school curriculum. More precisely, the basic tenets of Shinto were no longer meant to be believed in, but simply appreciated and passed on the next generation. It is also surmised that prewar schools were “missionary centers” for the state Shinto religion. During fieldwork, I learned that this type of education, aspects of which have received scholarly criticism, was articulated by postwar regulations on the strict separation between the church and state (Yamaguchi 1998). From the perspective of the present analysis, however, one can identify from that time the apparent change in the Japanese people’s sense of religion. In fact, it is precisely these educational reforms that have made the Japanese a non-denominational majority and have increasingly changed the shift in the meaning of mythical festivals from being something deeply religious to simply enjoyable activities. The obvious conclusion from a micro-analysis of the Kuniumi festival would be that small events can be used to study the ideology of the period and the possible changes that occurred over time.

## 6. Case Study 5: Mando Festival in Kariya City

Here, I turn my narrative inward to consider my final mini case study of the Mando festival held annually in Kariya City, Aichi Prefecture (Nagoya) at the Akiba shrine of Ginza (Kariya), which boasts more than 230 years of history since the mid-Edo period (around the 17<sup>th</sup> century), and is still a major highlight. It is designated as an important cultural asset of the prefecture, praying for protection from fire and safety in the town. However, the origin of the Mando festival is related to people's living conditions (especially the lack of rainfall) in the Kariya areas. When vicious hunger attacked the people, the lord of Kariya Castle reportedly wished for rain: rain then followed and saved the people. Therefore the festival is also called the "rain-making ritual." Ecologically, the Hekikai-gun area—where Kariya City is located—is not blessed with convenient access to water. Prior to the modern era, Hekikai-gun was mostly wasteland, with thickets and undergrowth, and villages were scattered throughout the wasteland. Farming in a land lacking water was very difficult, and around the end of the Edo period (1603–1867), the Meiji Irrigation Canal was constructed to solve this problem.

It has been suggested that the construction of the Meiji Irrigation Canal is an episode that symbolizes the fact that Hekikai-gun was not well served by water. In 1778, a musical performance with flutes and drums was introduced for the first time at this festival. At that time, Mando made its first appearance, and hence the Mando festival was reportedly established in the region. Thus, it bears observing that concerns about poor access to water led people to pray for rain, which gradually developed into the current form of the Mando festival.

Essentially, the Mando festival, held over two days, the last Saturday and Sunday of July or the first weekend of August represents a grand event with parades of people carrying Mando lanterns through the city of Kariya. It brings together approximately 2,000 participants, including local residents and local businesses. Specifically, Mando are warrior dolls colorfully decorated with papier-mâché (called *Mando*—which literally means "ten thousand lanterns") finely crafted out of bamboo and Japanese (*washi*) paper, and in many cases often modelled on Kabuki paintings and warriors. The largest dolls are about 5m high, 3m wide, and 60 kg in weight. Flames are lit in the mandos, and the sight of them floating in the midsummer twilight is a truly epic one that utterly captivates all who see it. The Mandos are carried by the townspeople. At night the lanterns are lit and the warriors depicted on the lantern are illuminated to create an imaginary world. *Wakashu* (young men) take turns carrying the dolls and dance to the accompaniment of flutes and drums (see Figures 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3). As Strecker (1997: 217) has argued for visual ethnography, the interpretation of such material and visual cultures and other elements of experience should only be possible within the "[specific] rhetorical [and socio-cultural] context in which they are embedded." Obviously, everyone in the scene appears to be familiar with the Nebuta Festival, in which huge lanterns called *Nebuta* are paraded around on floats, and dancers called *Haneto* surround the *Nebuta*, jumping around energetically to the sound of musical accompaniment.

Sociologically, the Mando festival plays a significant role in connecting all generations to the



Figure 7.1 Mando—colorfully decorated with papier-mâché warrior dolls used during the Mando festival in Kariya

Source: Aichi Now-Official Site for Tourism Aichi  
<https://www.aichi-now.jp/en/spots/detail/229/>



Figure 7.2 *Wakashu* (Young men) carrying the dolls and dance to the accompaniment of flutes and drums during the Mando festival in Kariya

Source: Aichi Now-Official Site for Tourism Aichi  
<https://www.aichi-now.jp/en/spots/detail/229/>



Figure 7.3 Exhibition of the Mando during the Mando Festival in Kariya

Source: [https://www.kankomie.or.jp/en/event/detail\\_35039.html](https://www.kankomie.or.jp/en/event/detail_35039.html)  
 Nippon-kichi, 207/2/2014

future: as in the past, the Mando Festival is attended by people of all ages—from small children to the elderly. More importantly, it ultimately serves to strengthen the bonds of the local community. It transpired in key interviews and contextualized conversations that festival participants included not only residents' groups from each town, but also corporate groups such as Denso and Aisin, which are major automobile-related manufacturers of the Toyota Group and headquartered in Kariya City. This suggests that from the elderly people who belong to the town's residents' association to the generation of society's leaders who belong to corporations, and the young people who will lead Japan in the future who belong to children's associations, festival participants are able to pass on the tradition of the Mando Festival in

Kariya City.

In light of the recent transition to the Internet society, it could be stated that the Mando festival has also become more and more important as a setting, where people can come into direct contact with each other. However, as mentioned earlier, it bears the connotation of praying for rain, as the region suffered droughts in the past. Even more important is the very fact that this tradition is rarely seen in modern society. It should be clear from this brief overview that the rationale behind the performance of the Mando festival is the local community's effort to preserve it as part of traditional Japanese culture that needs to be kept alive against the influences of globalization. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the scale of the festival has been reduced to only the display of Mando lanterns, but it will eventually return to its original form with the participation of many local residents as in previous years. As with all such narratives, these stories of shared celebrations in festivals, shrines, and processions were directed both at constructing a past and at a specific context in the present.

## 7. Discussion: Toward a Reflexive Ethnography of Shared Festivals in Japan

This synthesis has focused mainly on short five case studies of community-based ritualized festivals in specific Japanese settings to demonstrate that different models of analyzing them—each with its very basic structures of meaning, its celebratory climax (moments of shared communion), and lively and active effects in the world, in the social structure or in the psychology of the participants—imply different conceptions of the local community, often charged with a cosmological value, religious traditions, and cultural heritage. At least for anthropology (and especially for my present case of quick-fix anthropology), this may reflect the acknowledgment that the “scope and components of each festival rend it open to interpretation through different conceptual frameworks” (Sayari and Gün (2019: 376), depending on the fieldwork context. In these typical different field situations, readers should infer that I have positioned myself as an ethnographer with many strands of identification) to focus particularly on the quality of relations with the sampled local communities, which in turn tried just as hard to understand my behavior during the period of study.

Considering the importance of symbols, meanings, and processes woven into the festival atmosphere, however, the most important elements can definitively be discerned here from the perspective of practitioners (the local and non-local festival attendees). In so doing, I take into consideration a reflexive awareness of not only the visual dimensions of the Japanese culture in question but also of my own cultural and individual understanding and use of visual images and technologies at hand. In this context, I attempt to underscore the local participants' expression of authenticity as the antecedent of their cultural festival satisfaction (for further details on local participants' perceived authenticity and their cultural behavioral intensions in festivals, see Shin et al. 2012; Song et al 2013; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Ramkissoon and Uysal 2010; and Ramkissoon and Uysal 2014).

The first point, with primordial roots, is the fact that festival participants, themselves, in

large-scale interaction, display the retention of cultures characterized by ancestors' rituals in which continuing bonds with the deceased predecessors seem a natural part of life. By participating in the creative activities and interplay dynamics of their shared festivals, the local populations are, to use Peters' (2002) subtle formulation, "dancing with the sacred" from the perspective of traditional personal understandings of the invisible world populations (*kami*, deceased predecessors, righteous ancestors). The annual performance of these tranquil and highly centered events, therefore, allows participants to not only perpetuate their own religious traditions and cultural heritage but also to find meaning and purpose in their lives, while living harmoniously in their ever-changing region and on planet Earth. This amounts to people's consideration of their place identity, which is predicted by overall level of satisfaction. As such, it actually denotes the cognitive connection depicting a symbolic link between individual practitioners and their specific localized festival experiences, including cherished memories about the place (Gu and Ryan 2008; Ramkissoon et al. 2012).

Following Sørensen's (2005: 43) insights, one could further argue that these ritualized festivals display, in a number of ways, attendant beliefs and prototypical "actions that provoke certain hermeneutic strategies in participants and observers alike." In light of Van Winkle and Falk's (2015: 47) comprehensive insight into festival perspectives, one further encounters, in each of the above case studies, instances whereby participants (especially the most important actors in these festival dynamics) have naturally communicated "affective and cognitive elements, functional and hedonistic components, and personal, social and cultural, and physical festival [features]" (bracketed text by the author). In this respect, it is frequently emphasized that "images play a central role in the human mind and in human discourse which is 'metaphorically' grounded" (Tyler 1987; Lakoff and Johnson 1980, quoted in Strecker 1997 and reviewed by Pink 2007: 32). To a large extent, it is equally useful to note that these striking patterns and other frame stories in this ethnographic study are akin to the startling assumption according to which people's "memory and memories become heralds of continuity and in association with their identity" (Antze and Lambek 1996, reviewed by Chanza 2022: 94). In essence, this identity is "formed by the interaction between self, other, and society, and builds a bridge between the inside and the outside personal and the public worlds" (Karlsen 2007, reviewed by Jaeger and Mykletun 2013: 214).

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that the performance of ritualized festivals at the shared shrines, such as Akiba shrine of Ginza (Kariya), Samegawa shrine (Kikonai, Hokkaido), and Konomiya shrine (Inazawa) ultimately reflects (at least until recently) a peculiar cultural way of understanding attachment and identity (personal, social, and collective, see Snow 2001), especially for those in quest of cultural pursuits. This then means that these shrines and their surrounding landscapes are regarded here as constructed memory sites and sacred, or so to say, sites of shared religious participation: thus their resonance with Turner's (1974) subtle concept of "sacred peripherality" (Turner 1974). Importantly in such a symbolic interpretation (whether culturally specified or idiosyncratic), this identity becomes territorial, and, by implication, shows how contextual circumstances (e.g. location and cultural history) and the continuation of cultural practices across generations are identified, understood, and accepted. This is very evident in the above-outlined festivals that range from physical manifestation of

religious ceremonies to participation at social gatherings.

Inspired by Ramkissoon’s (2015: 45–46) theoretical framework, I further posit, from the perspectives of an event-centered ethnography and socio-environmental psychology, that shared festivals in both rural and urban areas of Japan ultimately display a logical flow between the constructs related to festival satisfaction and residents’ future intentions in festival celebrations. The following seven propositions (among many others) are, therefore, developed and schematically represented in Figure 8.

- Proposition 1:** Festival authenticity positively influences satisfaction with the shared festival in Japanese settings
- Proposition 2:** Festival authenticity positively influences behavioral intentions to celebrate shared festivals every year.
- Proposition 3:** Festival motivation positively influences satisfaction with the Divali festival.
- Proposition 4:** Festival motivation positively influences satisfaction with the community-based festivals.
- Proposition 5:** Festival satisfaction positively influences place identity.
- Proposition 6:** Place identity positively influences behavioral intentions to celebrated shared festivals.
- Proposition 7:** Festival satisfaction positively influences future intentions.

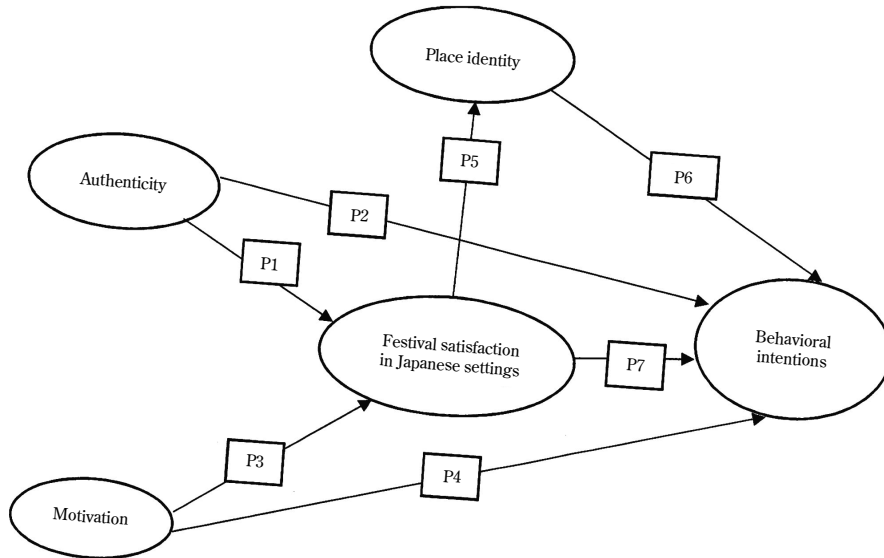


Figure 8 Theoretical framework of festival dynamics in Japanese settings  
 Source: The author’s adaptation from Ramkissoon (2015: 46) proposed model

Perhaps relevant here is the ethnographically interesting notion of religious outlook and whole community identity, which has been effected or brought about through a “generative” performance to assert local cultural values. At the very least, Landis and MacAulay (2017: 42) concur that every performance is itself “generative” (brings something into being) and not only

representational. This focus on individual creativity has been brought to the forefront in some anthropological work. Rapport, for example, has aptly recognized the individual “as a seat of consciousness, as well-spring of creativity, as guarantor of meaning” as opposed to a “*dissolved, decentered, deconstructed* individual actor and author as he or she appears in Durkheimian, Structuralist and Post-Structuralist schools of social science” (Rapport 1997, quoted in Pink 2007: 35, original italics.). It creates presence through ambience, setting, action, props, etc. as well as creatively transforming the actors, the audiences, space, time, and all who witness the event or participate in it.” At least in the specific context of the sampled local communities, as participants exemplify both the empirical and social imaginary—as realm of imagination (Noye 1995, reviewed by Landis and MacAulay 2017: 44), the venerated agent (god, person, object or relic) was essentially involved in the anecdotes from communities’ shared past that exalted its traditions and folk genres. Perhaps over and above this connection, however, it is useful to point out here that the rituals, even in a very simple society, reach into the depth of individual and collective lives and into the most fundamental attachments among individuals in their own right.

It must be admitted that, by being involved in intimate relationships that are full of ambivalence, the worshipped persons or objects, then, have more than one meaning. It is my contention that the meanings and rituals available to them in contemporary Japanese culture have much to do with their continuing bonds with the living community and the abode of the deceased predecessors or righteous ancestors. Thus one is close to Chanza’s (2022: 87) analysis of “the symbolic relation between popular religiosity and the religious festivity or *la festa*,” but with the added component of memory made explicit: thus its resonance with Durkheimian understanding of public rituals, where “local and national identity are reinforced through group membership” (Brettell 1990: 57). More specifically, considering the objective (social and structure) and subjective principles of organization (Bourdieu 1989: 20), one can further argue that the “subjective construction of the agent’s vision emerges within the limits of structural constraints” (Bourdieu 1989: 18), in the festival and for the host community itself.

Another key dimension of narrative analysis is that participants perform short-term and recurring festivals (Saleh and Ryan 1993; Getz 2008) in a decidedly urban religious setting, showing how festivals, which are more in the spectrum of ideas (Getz 2010), represent a meaningful public space for the complex dynamic of socio-religious interaction and self-representation at the individual and collective level. Examined from this perspective, I later saw that these psycho-religious and sociological dynamics are similar to those of many festivals, such as the Saint ’Efisio festival in Sardinia during which “the dynamic and participatory nature of religious ceremonies and festive celebrations encourages social cohesion and the construction of collective identities” (Cocco and Bertran 2021: 2; for further details, see Frost 2016; Leal 2016; Ramkissoon 2015).

It should now be plain that the continuing significance of celebrating such community festivals (often involving long-range planning) in public Japanese settings, as socio-religious practices and ethnographic objects, is reinforced in today’s context where the importance of the society and individuals is disappearing as communities are beset by the changes brought about by modernization and globalization. But significantly, more recent work in the

anthropology of performance also offers important insights into the potential of this pattern to be often manifested in decidedly religious spaces in which these previously well-established community festivals occur and in the ways in which a variety of organizers and other important actors effectively play a subtle role in the initiation and production of these events and their intended beliefs, “although the specific theme of the celebration [related to an element of history, tradition or culture of the particular place] varies widely from religious and/or traditional to contemporary and arguably inauthentic” (Mair 2019: 4, bracketed text by the author; for a more ethnographic explanation, see Green 1997; Douglas et al. 2001; Getz 2010; Jordan 2016). At least in the case of the Mando festival in Kariya, however, it was notable that such a gathering has been impossible since 2020 as the region suffered the circumstances of the Covid-19 crisis.

The third aspect to be considered here seems a fairly obvious observation from the social and gender lens. In the context of this participation pattern, it was understood that the community involvement, beliefs in their culture and values themselves are sufficient to promote local festivals and events as significant components of their lived-experience and basic survival. Perhaps more to the point, it transpired that Japan itself displays features of a male-dominated society. In retrospect, it is apparent, however, that community festivals can provide an occasion where social issues can be brought to light and where existing barriers to women’s participation in society can be broken down.

A fourth construct, more or less simultaneously, indicates a growing understanding that the ritualized, spatial, temporal, and structured community festivals in Japan have also over decades displayed key fundamental tenets of sustainability in terms of the interdependencies of their socio-cultural, economic, and environmental issues and impacts. Similarly, following Mair’s (2019: 6) formulation, it would seem in all sampled local communities that while festivals bridge divides and “encourage positive cross-community social interactions,” they also, on occasion, “contribute to environmental sustainability through legacy and educative initiatives” (Mair 2019: 6). Perhaps most important, even within the event-centered ethnography, this postulate is akin to Sharma’s (2019: 366) evidence from the Hadoti region (Rajasthan) that local festivals “can work as backbone not only for income but also for the development and reimagining of a region.”

Finally, out of these similarities, it could in reality be argued, from the vantage point of festivals as place-based and socio-religious events and phenomena (Duffy and Mair 2017), that temporality and spatiality are intertwined in the lived-religious experience of the setting which festival participants construct annually. At least in this specific context as in many others, then, ritualized and contextualized festivals are also regarded as a spatial representation of the local community’s sub-culture in a historically and regionally shared distant past. Most importantly, perhaps, this prominent aspect of the community festival and its influence implies the notion of communities of interest as being the centers of festivals. It is true that, on the whole, these long-term established symbolic products, with their social and cultural significance affectively display, even in hazardous situations, the feelings of belonging and sharing, connection and cohesion (for a useful discussion along these lines, see Johnstone 2012; de Geus, Richards and Toepoel 2016; Duffy and Mair 2017). In only slightly altered form, therefore, I can, inspired by



Wittgenstein's concept of "family-resemblance"—for analyzing the content of category of play (itself a category with more than circumstantial interest in the study of both aesthetics and ritual, reviewed by Sørensen 2005: 40)—argue that all salient elements (or common basic characteristics—including the opaque causal relation between conditional space, the action space, and purported effect space) of festivals are conspicuously present in all instances of the above-outlined types of shared cultural festival celebrations as well.

Even this brief overview would indicate that the Japanese case under scrutiny differs contextually in detail from other such case studies, but the general principles are found all over the world in local faith-based communities. But equally important is the linking of past, present, and future in such ritualized festivals, denoting what Sutton (2001) aptly coined as "prospective memory." Follow-up interviews, narratives, and micro-ethnographic analysis of liminalities showed that the material objects—such as shrines and their respective graves where deities are remembered—are places that express many different meanings: cultural identity or religious beliefs, and certain character traits of the venerated objects or deceased agents, the decorum of the local community and their presence in the shrines. My sense from the field and through sporadic correspondence with a few native Japanese in the post-fieldwork period is that the performative nature of festivals is concerned with and deeply embedded in issues of identity as the "meanings and values of a group are embodied" (Bauman 1986: 133).

During the post-event conversations and interviews, there were also reflections on factors suggesting that this last single feature of the local community may become particularly clear when participants dimly grasp and profoundly experience different constitutive aspects or crucial moments of their respective performance-centered festivals. In light of Turner (1974), there was evidence that such ritual moments associated with religion and spiritual life and oriented towards the future ultimately culminated in a *liminal* moment of *communitas* (a new community formed by participants as long as the festival lasts), which is anti-structural and anti-hierarchical realizing an egalitarian sociality among participants who share a joint project of shared common devotional performance at a particular rural or urban setting. The point is, however, as Werbner (2010: 239) cogently observed, that "religious identity is anchored in these moments of *communitas* dialogism without negating diversity."

From the standpoint of cultural performance, however, the Mando festival is relevant to this discussion because it provides an important and revealing case for understanding how and why a performance-centered cultural festival typically delineates a modest interrelationship between people's fundamental faith practices and their concerns about climate change adaptation from within the Kariya context. One might argue, of course on the basis of the informants' post-fieldwork thoughts, that the more the lack of water and other climate change impacts continue to impact on the Kariya region, the more its local community, perhaps more than other Japanese local communities, will keep on demonstrating, through the Mando festival, strength and creativity in a time of stress. By the same token, it is interesting to realize the extent to which festival managers and participants have been temporarily and spatially supported by local authorities and entities in their efforts to build on these strengths. Not to do so seemed to some informants and residents at best to represent an opportunity lost and at worst a moral transgression.

Arguing along the same path, Brown (2017: 312) precisely indicated how, against the challenge of the regular droughts and unpredictable weather patterns, “the standard response to extended periods of drought within religious communities is to [regularly] pray for rain.” However, the significance of these rituals cannot be oversimplified. This is partly because it is universally performed by religiously committed practitioners in almost all cultures and societies. In Zimbabwe, South Africa, Kenya, and (to a much lesser extent) the Democratic Republic of the Congo (to name but a few), “this challenge of minimal survival certainly applies to rainmaking/rains asking rituals in more traditional forms of culture and religion. More importantly, it is also applied to Christianity, originally established through missionary endeavors” (Brown 2017: 312).

But notwithstanding this general evaluation, there is often something odd about praying for rain in the context of climate change. Particularly intriguing is the question of whether it makes sense to pray for rain if one knows in advance that droughts in Kariya are related to something aggravated by climate change. Of equal concern, exercising ethnographic reflexivity, is to determine how the community members react in case of a failure in ritual practices. In any case, however, recent research has borne out Concradie’s (2017) viewpoint that any attempt to address this particular question will certainly bring into play “confessional differences, contextual needs, and underlying worldviews.” On this point, it became obvious that the memory and heritages central to contemporary social and cultural collective imaginings of the local community in Kariya and its constituents can be grasped from this perspective. It is already clear then that the facets of the Mando festivals I tried to highlight in this paper with a more, in some ways, distinctly religious, focus merely rely on contextual analyses and foreground the role of lived religion in a decidedly urban setting beset by the changes brought about by modernity, urbanization, and globalization, as well as contact with Buddhism, Christianity, and Western culture. In hindsight, religious patterns that emerged here include the identity and character of God and various forms of spirituality, including the interplay between belief and action, and the divine and human agency. Thinking rationally, it might seem that these often overlooked crucial patterns of cultural performance (the association of the empirical network and the social imaginary) define every local community and privilege the interactive network of relationship at the core of its spiritual culture.

Even with regard to the effects of prayer, for example, it was undoubtedly apparent that many respondents in this study strongly believed that not only is the shared sense of community in motion reinforced, but there is also, as identified within public theological discourse, an interdependency of various forms of human and non-human participants in performance and the revitalization of spirituality in a specific locale. It is also notable that such processes are in context interactive, whereas this study focused primarily on the centrality of individual agency and experience during the performance-centered events in immediate and multiple cultural contexts. No doubt even this striking facet of the study ultimately invites researchers to determine how scientific insights are interpreted, integrated, and even used in a specific religious setting, especially when one considers the actions of gods.

Interestingly, while this emphasis on the anthropology of performance has many ramifications and implications, the focus on the present theme of community-based festivals

has led me to an acute awareness, previously absent, of how participants display the importance of their own background and experience, which they silently bring to these festivals. However, on the micro (or local and personal) level, it should be noted that one deals here with specific issues of the relationship between traditional Japanese and Western worldviews enthusiastically brought to the interface by participants and intelligibly articulated within the Kariya settings, where the impact of modern science, medicine, technology, and consumerism is evident. Furthermore, curiously, it entails a degree of spiritual discernment which is, in this specific context, a strength of Japanese wisdom traditions, which local communities express deliberately or perhaps without knowing.

More significant, however, are the expected results of these contextually shared festivals. On many occasions, although one may wonder if gods really alter weather patterns, this factor was evident in the field, as it also surfaced in walk-along interviews in which I engaged in more free-flowing conversations with three informants about their lived-religious experiences. However, by and large, one can posit that it is possible for God to do that, considering people's current (limited) scientific knowledge of the Earth's climate. Such challenges can be pursued more implicitly and explicitly. For my part, however, I have over the past decades increasingly come to appreciate the growing number of community-based festivals of this genre displaying some explicit collective sentiment and practical sensitivity. In line with this understanding, it is probably true to state that although festival participants, afterwards, understandably return to their normal structures, what remains is the memory or changes in personality. Perhaps what is distinctive, unique even, is the very fact that the local community in Kariya participate in the discourse about God's deeds in the world in a non-interventionist but objective way that still attracts practitioners at this point, and then is fully realized at community-based festivals and other short-term flashpoint experiences of physical, emotional, and collective activities.

A further point worth noting is that the appreciation comes in definitively when one considers the extent to which the ritual practice itself somehow resembles a "kind of idolatry associated with fatality cults—in ancient Israel but also in contemporary prosperity cults" (Conradie 2017: 325). In such a setting, it is critical, therefore, that "people get primitive and prelinguistic 'festival meaning' from their lived-festival experience in their life world" (Zhang 2019: 39). Evidence in this discussion, then, reinforces a previous startling acknowledgement and observable implication in cultural anthropology that "human beings act in situation of choice, so as to maximize their interest [whatever] they may perceive those interests to be" (Lewis 1974: 56, bracketed text by the author) in a shared syncretic (sub) culture.

## Conclusions

The main thrust of this study was to set the stage for revisiting five Japanese performance-centered cultural festivals (with their non-arbitrary, perceptible basis, and purported effects that one can easily grasp intuitively) but also to reach into the past and present of Japanese communities to provide a fine interpretive tool for demonstrating how some of the salient (understood and shared) facets and contours of these contextually shared events essentially

connect participants to the construction of their identity, cultural being, and preservation of their traditions within specific settings. Systematically, two broad categories were constructed. One posed the intangible heritage as organizing these community festivals in Japanese settings is associated with the element of play and enjoyment of feasts or culture in general. Infusing the festival participants with the history, and the context that makes it relevant, it then became clear that their festival experiences appeared to be fundamentally lived on three levels: a sensory experience, a cultural experience motivated by permanent associations to the historical past of the region, and the preparation of the stage in which residents and visitors interact during the festival. The second construed, on one hand, correlation between Japanese culture and religions and the (shared historical) past at the community festivals, and, on the other hand, festival participants' adaptations to specific contexts and issues, with new interconnections manifesting in varying ways. It is critical, therefore, that this ethnographic record (narrative) is filled with references to the ethologically human interaction of local community members with Japan's culturally prescribed behavioral repertoires and their cognitive obligation to both bypass domain-specific expectations and constantly maintain "the line between authenticity and the cultural mirage" (Landis and MacAulay 2017: 18). In this setting of festival industry, it seems, therefore, likely that Japanese social media is naturally instrumental in changing the role and functions or effectiveness of festival participants "to become more collaborative and social" (Mair 2019: 7), while being arguably engaged in creating spaces of sociality, where performance and communion intersect.

Perhaps one consistent derivative implication arising from this study for this discussion and the overall thesis is that the shared celebration in the selected religious festivals, shrines, and processions not only represent, at the very least, the essence of Turner's notion of *communitas* but also embody patterns that deliberately conform to the three major discourses that Getz identified in his synthetic review of festivals as performance events. These include (i) a classical discourse concerning the roles, meanings and impacts of festivals in society and culture; (ii) an instrumentalist discourse, where festivals are viewed as tools to be used in economic developments, particularly in relation to tourism and place marketing; and (iii) an event management discourse, which focuses on the production and marketing of festivals and the management of festival organization" (Getz 2010, reviewed by Mair 2019: 4). It is precisely out of this epistemological perspective that the findings of this regionally centered study give credence to Addo's (2009: 231) conclusion that "the myriad, true meanings and histories of festivities are accessible mainly by repeatedly participating in them, while maintaining a sense of their transformative potential for oneself." Still, further epistemological footwork is needed here because the interpretative perspective that undergirds constructed community-based festivals and events is very different from the socio-religious assumptions. Equally deemed important to a future synthesis are "the undescribed spheres [constituent elements] of influence on the event—those infinite cultural and personal motivations that circle around the people involved" (Valentine and Matsumoto 2001: 85, bracketed text by the author).

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