

Cultural Performance Festivals in Japanese Settings: An Ethnographic Narrative Analysis and Interpretations [Part II]

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Abstract

This article aims to establish a reflection on the multifaceted nature of five cultural performance festivals in Japanese settings from the perspectives socio-cultural anthropology and performance. Specifically, I delve into the historical origins and cultural significance of these tranquil and highly centered festive events, highlighting their pivotal role in safeguarding human cultural heritage across generations and shaping modern identities. The phenomenological interpretative analysis accurately reinforces the startling assumption that local traditional cultural festivals ultimately represent potent means of strengthening social cohesion and identity, tradition, and artistic expression of the local community. In this sense, the comprehensive review further provides some crucial insights on how salient facets of these festivals are particularly suitable for communities not to only celebrate their great common heritage, but also to foster a deep sense of pride, connection and spirituality among participants, and a reverence for their deceased predecessors or righteous ancestors. I argue that festival participants' persisting beliefs and practices have striking narratives and will undoubtedly continue to influence and transform local communities over decades. In today's highly globalized period with intensified interurban competition, social and political changes occur at a rapid pace; however, practitioners need only to annually adjust to the crucial rules of festivals that are established collectively while being simultaneously concerned with acknowledging the way these rules are forged against their socio-religious perception. On the whole, this study has shed light on the intricate relationship between tradition, artistic innovation, and community participation within the realm of Japanese cultural performance festivals.

Keywords: Japan, local communities, cultural performance festivals, embeddedness; deceased predecessors, righteous ancestors; process, social cohesion, preservation of cultural heritage, symbolic patterns.

Introduction

As I have anthropologically investigated some distinctive events that unfold during cultural performance festivals (*matsuri*) in Japanese settings (Munsi 2023), my understanding of their salient aspects (such as audiences, subcultural network, spectacle, symbolic patterns, social memory and connections, and power spaces of cultural negotiations) has greatly improved,

allowing me to better understand their eventual vitality and complexity, socio-cultural contexts, and long-term/short-term economic impacts. This article thus represents a sequel to my previous work that aims to bring five other case studies of Japanese religious festivals together into a reflective analysis. The comprehensive review of their salient facets thus depicts the empirical dimension, significant forms of symbolism, and material-sensory nature of the artistic expressions that constitute these festivals in different Japanese communities.

For the purposes of this study, and following Jansa's review (2017: 199), the term *festival* is used herein to denote a "themed, public celebration" (Getz 2005: 21; see also Turner 1982) that is held regularly at the same place. It is a (sacred or profane) time when community histories, values, ideologies, and identity are jointly shared (Falassi 1987: 2). Most directly, this entails that a *sacred agency*—which is manifested in a single religious festival—constitutes and unites the festive congregation and is materialized in understandable ways in various artistic devices, such as images, music, dance, artifacts, and so forth. In this connection, however, cultural performance festivals are broadly conceptualized as parts of the cultural public sphere (Sassatelli 2011: 12), translating a reality of "an institution creating an intimate public sphere, which is defined as affective space of shared consumption and experience of social belonging" (Driscoll 2015, reviewed by Jansa 2017: 200). The very concept (and label) of *performance* in turn is herein specifically understood and examined from a ritual (Schechner 2003) viewpoint with an emphasis put upon its repetitive, intensifying, and liberating aspects. In such modern festivals—contextually "defined as organized sets of acts performed to commemorate an event, person, deity, or the common identity of the performers—audiences and performers often coincide in ritualized spectacle" (Addo 2009: 218) in decidedly rural and urban settings. From this perspective, the substantive concern is to provide an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of individuals, the social structures, the relationships with the events, and the ways in which meanings and identities are constructed and negotiated in space and time.

Methods

This cross-sectional anthropological research was carried out on various dates between 2020 and 2024, using a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Following library research, the research strategies allowed me to gain a comprehensive understanding of cultural performance festivals in five different Japanese settings. Primary data was collected through digital ethnography and interviews with five festival organizers and ten community members involved in each festival. Additionally, direct observation and document analysis were conducted to gather qualitative data. Within the sampling strategy adopted, I particularly tried to understand various aspects of the locals' cultural performance festivals and lived experiences from the members' point of view, not merely analyzing them from a third-person perspective. From the perspective of cultural studies, however, readers should infer at the outset that the six case studies of cultural performance festivals discussed herein are chosen merely because of their historical significance, popularity, and representation of different artistic traditions.

Theoretical Perspective

Theoretically, I fully acknowledge that all these tranquil and highly centered events are embedded in specific contexts, carrying historical, religious, or cultural significance. Based on Getz's (2010) classical discourse, I attempt to determine the roles, meanings, and impacts of five different religious festivals in Japanese settings. Particularly intriguing is the question of who the audience is, and what the historical context and evolution of cultural performance festivals in Japan is. Ethnographic materials gleaned from five case studies also allow me to ask: how and to what extent do cultural performance festivals contribute to the preservation and transmission of traditional customs and cultural heritage? What role do artistic innovation and contemporary influences play in shaping the performances and presentation of cultural festivals in Japan? How do the organizers influence the final results? How do cultural performance festivals impact local economies, tourism, and the global perception of Japanese culture? What challenges and opportunities do cultural performance festivals face in contemporary Japanese society? Considering the cultural performance industry in Japan, I argue that festivals contextually represent cultural preservation activities and potent means of strengthening social cohesion (spontaneous union of performers and audience as *communitas*) and identity constructions, tradition, artistic expression of the corporate community, and lasting social support. It is precisely in terms of these facets and many other ritualistic elements of liminality that festivals provide a deeper sense of pride, connection, and spirituality among participants, and a reverence for their deceased predecessors or righteous ancestors.

The synthesis is thus divided into three main sections in which integrated and interrelated themes surveying the past drive the analysis forward with recent research. Given that Part I of this study has already provided a detailed background to the cultural performance festivals in Japan, the first section explores the results gleaned from five case studies of festivals, tracing their origins and evolution, and providing a descriptive analysis of their distinctive features, their type as cultural heritage festivals, their purpose as rituals and economic instruments, as well as their size (huge, small, several days, local, international). Then I bring the results of all the case studies into a discussion of some common themes they address, with a special emphasis put upon the visual encounters in both ritual contexts and everyday lives. This comparative case study evidence is thus deemed an appropriate approach to delve into the cultural significance of these festivals, analyzing their role in preserving tradition, fostering community engagement, and constructing cultural identity. In this regard, I have also taken into consideration the issue of a construed festival's display of spectacle. The conclusion puts forth the symbolic aspects of these festive events and their preservation of cultural heritage.

Results

The following relevant findings of five Japanese cultural performance festivals delineate how sampled participants entered realms of Japanese folk practices, with seemingly symbolic meanings, complex techniques and dynamics through which ideas, narratives, and spaces are

produced, regulated, and acquired symbolic value. Practically, participants intelligibly set in motion, within rural and urban settings, patterns that displayed their ritualized festivals as a re-assertion of pre-modern local deities and calendrical rites in formal Shinto religion.

Case Study 1: Nagoya Autumn Festival

Nagoya City, the capital of Aichi prefecture, is conveniently located in the Owari region, in the very heart of Japan and covers an area of approximately 326.50 square kilometers. Divided into 16 wards, it represents one of the nation's key industrial zones. As of April 1, 2022, its population numbered approximately 2,317,985 inhabitants grouped into 1,131,709 households (Nagoya City Hall 2022). Ethnographically, the city is also attractive for its rich and flavorful local dishes such as *miso-nikomi udon*, *miso katsu*, *tebasaki*, *ankake spa*, and *hitsumabushi*. Similarly, Nagoya Cochin and *kishimen* are famous, making the city a haven for food lovers.

Moreover, and most important for the present analysis, Nagoya City is well-known for its historical association with Samurai armies and their three commanders, namely Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu. These three unifiers of the nation were reportedly born in and around this Japanese city (for further details, see Japan National Tourism Organization 2018; Hall 1991; Scott and Kenneth 2004). Perhaps the genius of their representation by participants in this festival may become evident to readers upon understanding the processes and functions discussed below.

The Nagoya autumn festival reportedly began in 1955, during the Showa era (1926–89) corresponding to the reign of the emperor Hirohito, precisely “when a war-ravaged Nagoya was emerging from the ashes of World War II. It was initially performed under the name *Nagoya Trade and Industrial festival*” (Glenn 2012: #2, emphasis added). The following year, it was renamed the “Nagoya Festival” and has been held annually since then, becoming the largest event in Nagoya. In this spirit, it was declared by the government of Aichi Prefecture, the City of Nagoya, and the Nagoya Chamber of Commerce to promote the economy and commerce. However, narratives revealed that the rationale behind its establishment also relies on the hitherto citizens' vehement desire to have a festival that could culturally entertain and educate citizens. Over the years, as Nagoya's economy has grown, the event too has grown in its current grand scale.

[It would be surprising if this had not been the case. Looking back, one might recall how it was hitherto] a rare commercial festival in Japan. From the beginning, a flower tram using the Nagoya City Tram was in operation, which continued until 1973, when the entire line was discontinued. In 1959, the festival was scheduled to be held to commemorate the completion of the reconstruction of Nagoya Castle's keep after it was destroyed in an air raid during World War II (City of Nagoya 2023, bracketed text and English translation by the author).

More precisely, the Nagoya autumn festival, which is staged annually each October,

represents one of the greatest festivals in Nagoya City. Every year this majestic festival event—albeit without a deity or religious content—brings various locations together within Nagoya City and creates great excitement: the entire city is filled with a festive air, celebrating its past, present, and future—the city’s long and exciting history really comes alive. The 2019 statistics revealed that it had a scale of 1.53 million participants (Nagoya Matsuri Kyoshinkai 2022). However, I was told that its celebration was temporarily canceled in 1988 due to the Emperor Showa’s illness and between 2020 and 2021 (mainly because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic), and then resumed on October 15 and 16, 2022, after barely a two-year hiatus, on the occasion of its 68th anniversary. As expected, there was an overwhelming participation of residents and spectators who turned out along the city’s central streets to enjoy the celebration and catch a glimpse of the heroes of Japan once again. As things stand today, it can be assumed that participants will display an unprecedented festive atmosphere during the 2023 Festival that will be performed on October 21–22 with all its striking aspects.

By tracing the flow of this festival step-by-step, one should be then in position to present a brief-sketch of its features, including mainly processions and venue events, during which “the sounds of gunfire and of clashing swords and armor can be heard into the streets of central Nagoya” (Glenn 2012). In the title of his online article on the subject, Glenn (2012: #1), a community writer, is quite right to have ironically portrayed it as “the Samurai on the city streets.” Indeed, the whole festival atmosphere makes participants and onlookers experience emotionally the return of the city’s prominent figures to accept the praise and adulation of the city’s population.

Of the Nagoya autumn festival process, the first thing that strikes me is that its opening takes place with the pronouncing of blessings by the Shinto priests. This is immediately followed by the processions that progress from Nagoya Station to Yabacho on the first day and from the Nagoya City Hall (where the colorful parade begins) to Yabacho on the second day. The overall annual procession stretches 1.5 to 2 km in length through the wide streets of Nagoya and features over 700 active participants, many in period costume and traditional Samurai armor. In this connection, the festival’s venue events are purposely held at locations such as Nagoya Castle, Hisaya Odori Park, and Oasis 21, which also host craftsmen of Nagoya Exhibit as well as a performing arts festival. There are also many facilities that offer free admission during the festival, including Tokugawa Garden (Kawai Aichi 2023).

Ultimately, the highlight of the Nagoya autumn festival are the processions featuring various types of floats and carts accompanied by a band.¹ These processions include historical ones like

¹ Readers should infer that many of the floats pulled in this way are traditional floats associated with the three major festivals of Nagoya: the Toshogu Festival, the Wakamiya Festival, and the Sannomaru Tenno Festival. In the Edo period (1603–1867), Nagoya was home to these three major festivals. Each of them featured a parade of colorful floats and other festivities that took place around Nagoya Castle and Honmachi-dori Avenue, and were the busiest events in the castle area, with participants from all walks of life able to attend and enjoy the festivities (City of Nagoya 2023a). “In the first Nagoya Chamber of Commerce and Industry Festival in 1955, eight designated cultural asset carts participated. In the following year’s inaugural Yamakasa Assemble, eight designated cultural asset carts were joined by

the designated cultural property “*Yamakasa Soroi*”, and the municipal cultural property *Kagura Soroi*, as well as local ones like those of the children’s associations, sister city friendship parades, Nana-chan Squad, and Flower Car Parade. From an ethnographic-event centered perspective, however, it can be stated that the main event of the Nagoya Festival is perhaps the so-called “*Goto Eiko Gyoretsu*” (Local Heroes Parade). Essentially, this represents a gorgeous parade where participants dressed as the three prominent local heroes (Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu), along with about 600 armored warriors and other figures march around the Sakae area, in the central part of the city (Figure 1). Why do participants include these three men? All we know, it should be repeated, is that these three figures were reportedly born in the present-day Aichi Prefecture and played significant roles in the Sengoku period for the unification of Japan (Kawai Aichi. 2023; Glenn 2011; Tajima 1983).

There is a further consideration. Alongside these three prominent figures of the Warring States period, the procession also includes the notable women associated with them, such as Lady Nohime, Lady Nene, and Lady Sen, making a total of 600 participants (Kawai Aichi. 2023). In this connection, the festival organizers and participants claim that anyone living or working in Nagoya city who meets the application requirements, (including the ability to ride a horse for Oda Nobunaga’s role) can apply to be part of the procession. More interesting for ethnographers and historians of festivals is the observation that battle re-enactments using matchlock gun and swords, with the warriors in armor (fully armored samurai with war



Figure 1. Decorated Dashi Float with mechanical puppets that is pulled through the streets with participants in period dress (happi) coats during the Nagoya autumn festival.

Source: Zastavkin/ 2000–2023.

one cart from Nakagawa Ward’s Ushitate and five carts from Toda, making a total of 14 carts assembled. Both the Nagoya Festival and Yamakasa Assemble, as evident from their origins, do not have a strong religious aspect. However, initially, a temporary shrine of Atsuta Shrine was set up in the south of Sakae’s TV Tower, and a mikoshi procession from Atsuta Shrine took place” (Nova Owarino Dashimatsuri 1998: #3, English translation by the author).

banners fluttering behind them) are, at various stages along the route, performed by members of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces, who engage themselves in a kind of powerful battle demonstration. “In between, are the heroes themselves.

[It is particularly interesting to note that the presence of] Oda Nobunaga, who commenced unification of Japan, only to be killed by a traitorous general before realizing his dream peace. Then, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who took over the helm from Nobunaga and quelled the various wars. Finally, Tokugawa Ieyasu, who upon the death of Hideyoshi, fought to maintain the peace, becoming Shogun in the process. Princesses, Warriors, and other attractions round out the parade (Glenn 2012: #2).

In fact, such a construed festival’s display of spectacle virtually becomes a central theme of this event. Here, it is necessary to further recall that the wittily formulated ideology of this festival emphasizes the recognition that ordinary citizens selected through public applications can take on these roles, allowing even regular employees to lead the procession through the town. Similarly, it transpired in interviews and contextualized conversations that the participation is open to both men and women, and this is understood in the context of the rationale of preserving the cultural heritage and identity of Nagoya city and its inhabitants. On the other hand, it would perhaps be better to determine here the aesthetic phenomena, particularly the material of tradition and folk art, which participants consider in the contemporary settings.

Apart from the *Goto Eiko Gyoretsu*, there are many other processions that deserve some comments here. The first one is called *Yamakasa Soroï* (Float Parade—a designated national cultural asset). Although it was canceled in 2022, it has a long history. Essentially, the *Yamakasa Soroï* features a total of nine floats parading through the city, showcasing traditional *karakuri* dolls. The oldest float represents the *Yutori-guruma*, which was created in 1658 during the Manji era. Most overriding is the consideration that this first procession includes various types of (traditional and non-traditional) flower decked floats, and their names differ depending on the way they are constructed. For example, there are floats called *Kasuisha*, which have elaborately painted and carved dolls dressed in colorful costumes, and floats called *Ogi-no-Go*, which have dolls with lion heads standing on their hands as cultural products. More importantly, ethnohistorical and ethnographic evidence revealed that some of these floats were created by specialist artists just before the festival in the early 1900s, while others date back to the 17th century (City of Nagoya 2023a, 2023b; Nova Owarino Dashimatsuri 1998; for a review of the floats or *Dashi*, see Tajima 1983; Ruperti, Vesco, and Negri 2018).

The second procession to be considered here is called *Kagura Soroï* (Sacred Dance Parade—a cultural asset designated by the city). Here, Glenn notes that

vantage viewpoints are in front of Nagoya City hall, where the parade begins, although the MC’s continual narrations can drone on a bit and VIP stands block some of the better views, [so] try the wide intersection of Otsu and Sakura streets, and the intersection of Otsu and Hirokoji Dori in front of

Mitsukoshi department store. This is where the matchlock gun and sword fighting battles are usually staged, providing some great photo and video opportunities” (Glenn 2012: #2).

Main performers replay major, key battles in the history of feudal Japan (pre-dating the Edo period). Although everything is almost entirely in Japanese, one gets the idea, with the colored flags and armies, with three prominent figures taking part in the battles—notably the feudal lords Nobunaga Oda, Hideyoshi Toyotomi and Ieyasu Tokugawa. As Figure 2 illustrates, it is generally understood that the feudal lords would be nothing without their wives and so Nohime (Nobunaga’s wife), Nene (Hideyoshi’s wife), and Senhime (Ieyasu’s wife), accompanied by their entourage of servants, follow their husbands.

There are several types of vehicles used in the *Kagura Soroi*, and multiple people surround them as they march. Notable among them is the *Kagura Yagura*, a vehicle containing lion heads, which has long become highly regarded as a regional cultural asset. Additionally, there are children from the city who carry original portable shrines, representatives from Nagoya’s sister cities (such as Los Angeles and Mexico City) appearing in open cars, and high school students from Nagoya City Schools designing and creating costumes that match the unusual and gigantic mannequin—affectionately referred to as *Nana-chan* doll—to participate in the procession (Figure 3). The Nana-chan Squad is a group of students from Nagoya Sakuradai High School’s Fashion and Culture Department who create costumes for and showcase them on the large Nana-chan doll located in front of Nagoya Station.



Figure 2. Along with the appearance of each feudal lord the important historical battles are reproduced from the Sengoku Period, which commonly known as the Warring States Period.

Source: Nagoya is not boring, 2022.



Figure 3. Nana-chan dolls being carried by a group of students during the Nagoya autumn festival

Photo by the author's assistant, October 2022.

Towering at 20 feet and weighing 1,322 pounds, the colossal dummy has stood vigil outside the Meitetsu Department Store in Nagoya for decades. She was initially built to advertise products at the department store but has since become a beloved city icon that's sometimes used to promote local events.

It is sufficient to emphasize that this procession with the Nana-chan is quite choreographed in a series of steps in which outward movements are correlated with inward transformations. The transformations involve movement from self-consciousness, to assurance, relief, gratitude, reverence, and seeking to pray. Walking through the movements of the Nana-chan generates a correspondence between motion and emotion, action and reaction. As they make steps forward, participants thus seemingly experience an authentic atmosphere. Interestingly, the Nana-chan doll—which is over six meters tall and made of PVC resin—was designed in Switzerland by the Schläppi company and installed in Nagoya in 1973. It was created as a symbol in commemoration of the first anniversary of the Meitetsu Department Store Seven Building (renamed to Young People Hall in 2006) which opened, targeting young people, in 1972 (Meitetsu Department Store 2023; Atlas Obscura 2023).

In addition, at central Hisaya Odori Park, stages are set up for volunteer organizations to showcase dance performances and various musical entertainments (i.e., Kagura music and dance, see Figure 4), martial arts demonstrations (see Figure 5), and the Kobudo Tournament.²

² The Kobudo Tournament is held during the Nagoya Festival, with the participation of various martial arts schools of Aichi and Gifu. Kobudo is a collective term for Japanese traditional techniques for the use of armor, blades and firearms, and techniques related to combat and horse riding.

Other stages are used for demonstrations of *Yabusame*, the samurai horseback archery at Atsuta shrine. At Oasis 21, skilled artisans demonstrate their advanced techniques, and the traditional Nagoya folk art called *Bo-no-Te* is performed. In this connection, all participants find themselves in *the festival atmosphere of noise or sound*, which is in effect both spatially confined and moderate, and a quite different experience from that of the traditional Maltese festivals celebrating Catholic patron saints, during which “noise, in this sense, sound is neither spatially confined nor moderated, become[s] a key signifier of underdevelopment of a missed bus to civilization” (Falzone and Cassar 2015: 149). Here, it is necessary to recall that the significance of such *sound* or *noise* for this foregoing discussion is that it has been recognized in the spatial analysis of festivals as an important element of cultural public space. Falzone and Cassar (2015: 145) even went far as to amply agree with Oosterbaan (2009), who argues that it ultimately represents “an essential constituent of identities,” and “an essential marker territoriality.”

During the festival, Nagoya Castle holds an autumn festival, offering a special opportunity to view the *Sugido-e* (cedar sliding door paintings) of the main keep, which are not usually accessible. Furthermore, Nagoya City Science Museum, art museums, and the Higashiyama Zoo and Botanical Gardens are open to the public free of charge. The entire city is dedicated to hosting a variety of events. In this way, the Nagoya Festival features events held in various locations throughout the city, providing an enjoyable cultural experience for people of all ages and genders. From the standpoint of socio-cultural anthropology, however, I believe that it is not enough to just enjoy the festival. While it is important to create a lively atmosphere, one



Figure 4. Hisaya Odori Park, running along the center of the city, becomes the stage for idol groups, live music performances, comedy shows, and much more.

Photo by the author's assistant, October 2022.



Figure 5. During the Nagoya Festival, traditional martial arts performances such as Kyudo, Japanese traditional archery, and Kendo are held in different locations around the city.

Photo by the author, October 2022.

must also learn from and pass down many traditions. Throughout history, Nagoya City has provided opportunities to experience various traditional cultures and learn about the importance of respecting historical figures like the three local heroes. Aichi Prefecture itself has a deep history, with many cultural assets and cherished traditional cultures.

My impression from the field is that the whole city comes to life celebrating its history, past and present. Indeed, one gets a mix of modern and historic Nagoya in this very organized parade, with some floats and marching bands. It is not insignificant that various notable figures participate each year in the Flower Car Parade. During the celebration of this festival on October 20th and 21st, 2022, for example, Akari Suda, a former SKE48 member who is from Nagoya, and celebrity impersonator Sara participated in the parade. One can equally enjoy various venue events, such as performances and talk shows by Samurai and Ninja Groups. The procession is concluded by the above-mentioned *Goto Eiko Gyoretsu*. A spatial analysis of this festival revealed that various efforts are made by the festival organizers and their associates to attract the attention of a wide range of people, including young people, by utilizing Twitter (now called X) real-time updates and offering an app to view 3D floats (Personal communication from a key informant, October 21, 2022). Arguably, the two-day Nagoya Festival involves the entire city with large-scale events and free admission to various facilities creating a lively atmosphere and boosting business for many shops in Nagoya. Through my research on the Nagoya Festival, I discovered that the procession of the three local heroes plays a significant role in promoting the festival. Their presence is vital to the festival and will continue to be a symbol of Aichi Prefecture's historical significance.

I also remember a discussion with my key informant, an elderly man who had lived in the area all his life. The overall experience in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis consequently led him to comment that: “It is our duty as modern individuals to deeply study and carry on these traditions to future generations. By fostering such awareness among all individuals, we can ensure that the valuable culture and history handed down to us will not disappear.” Interestingly enough, however, many other long-term residents were really aware of one challenge: the scaling down of the festival due to the measurable impact of the three-year hiatus related to the Covid-19 pandemic, which may have affected the recognition of this festival to some extent. However, it transpired that proactive use of social media and media coverage suggests a high possibility of a full recovery in the future. A micro-analysis reveals that the Nagoya Festival, as a large-scale event, is closely connected to the local community and is expected to contribute to the revitalization of Nagoya City while undergoing gradual changes.

Case Study 2: *Shinkage-ryu* Baton Handling Festivals in Zenshin Town

Here, I focus on the annual festival and the traditional performing art commonly known as *Shinkage-ryu Baton Handling* (善進町真影流棒の手) that is dedicated to a small Shinmei Shrine in Zenshin Town (善進町). In Nagoya City’s Minato Ward, there are over 15 Shinmei Shrines 神明社, mainly dedicated to the deity *Amaterasu-ōmikami*. It is important to mention at the outset that a Shinmei Shrine is managed by the residents, but it was difficult to contact them all together at the time of the research. On many occasions, therefore, I used direct observations. I visited the site and examined stone monuments and other sources. I also referred to the websites of the ward and prefectural shrine offices. Regarding the Zenshin Town *Shinkage-ryu* Baton Handling, I described it based on my own memory when I saw it. I also referred to a few interviews published on the ward’s website to supplement any unclear points. However, it is worth noting that the measurable impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has hindered the celebration of this festival in recent years. Thus, some considerations put forward in this section are based on interviews conducted in 2015 and 2018. More details are needed in this area to fully grasp the current situation of baton handling.

Essentially, the Shinmei Shrine enshrined the deity of Zenshin Town, whose Shinmei Shrine is also *Amaterasu-ōmikami* (Figure 6). In addition to the main shrine, there are two auxiliary shrines within the precincts of Zenshin Town’s Shinmei Shrine. Although I could not access them due to the presence of barriers, key informants clearly indicated that *Kagutsuchi-no-mikoto* is enshrined at the Akiba Shrine, while *Uga-no-Mitama-no-mikoto* is enshrined at the Chirifu Shrine. Locals have subscribed to the belief that *Kagutsuchi-no-mikoto* is the god of fire, while *Uga-no-Mitama-no-mikoto* is regarded to be the father of Emperor Jimmu (the first emperor, according to legend). Direct observations revealed two important facets of the landscape. First, there is not only the main shrine and auxiliary shrines within the precincts, but also a monument commemorating the soldiers of the army and another documenting the history of the shrine. There is also a bulletin board displaying the schedule of the festivals (Figure 7).

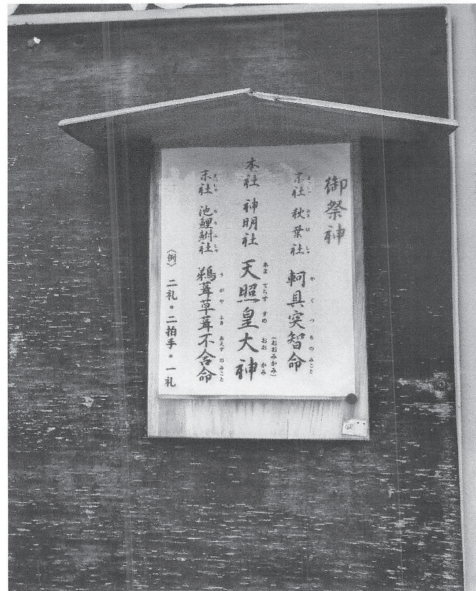


Figure 6. The enshrined deity of Shinmei Shrine
Photo by the author 31/05/2023.

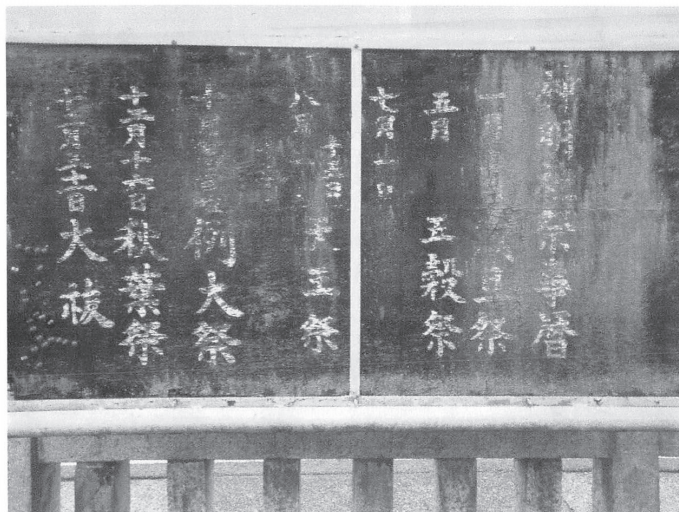


Figure 7. The Shinmei Shrine Festival Schedule
Photo by the author, 31/05/2023.

However, the most famous festival among the residents is ultimately the annual festival, held on the second Sunday of October. During this festival, the Zenshin Town Shinkage-ryu Baton Handling is dedicated. I will discuss this in the following sections.

The overall observation is that the Zenshin Town Shinkage-ryu Baton Handling takes place during the annual festival held in October at Shinmei Shrine. It particularly involves performances in pairs or groups of three, using weapons held in the hand. Children use long wooden sticks to strike each other, while adults perform with real blades attached to small swords or *naginata*. The performances include avoiding the swinging *naginata* and cutting the straw ropes tied to the opponent's forehead with the small sword held in the hand. However, since the swords are really sharp, the entire performance is filled with tension. On the day of the annual festival, food stalls set up by neighborhood association members line the shrine grounds, and many people in the vicinity, from children to the elderly, gather at the shrine. The main event among them is the dedication of the baton handling. In addition to the annual festival at Shinmei Shrine, baton handling is also performed at the Nagoya Festival and the Minato Ward Festival.

Historically, the Zenshin Town Shinkage-ryu Baton Handling has been performed since around the first year of the Kōka era (1844) and has been presented at Atsuta Shrine and Zenshin Shinmei Shrine (Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan 2023). Zenshin Town, located in Minato Ward, Nagoya City, was once a sea area that was reclaimed, and new fields were developed through land reclamation. Settlers from other areas were brought in to cultivate the land, and a village was formed. Baton handling was transmitted among the farmers as a form of play. Therefore, even today, when dedicating the baton handling, the performance is done in the attire of the old farmers (Figure 8). However, the inheritance of the



Figure 8. *The performance of the baton handling attire during the Shinkage-ryu Stick Baton Handling Festivals in Zenshin Town*
Source: Nagoya City Minato Ward website.

baton handling was interrupted during the chaotic post-war period. In 1955, a preservation society was formed by volunteers, and in the following year, it was designated as an intangible cultural asset of the city. In 1973, it was further designated as an intangible folk cultural asset of the city.

There is another rather important element regarding the inheritance of Zenshin Town Shinkage-ryu Baton Handling. Since baton handling uses real blades, it is a dangerous performance that poses a risk of injury. In addition, the way of movement differs depending on the weapon used, making it difficult for someone who is not an expert in handling that specific weapon to teach the technical aspects of the performance. Even the specialized techniques can only be acquired by learning from skilled practitioners and practicing from a young age. It is said that children often quit when they join school clubs, so there is a shortage of successors. Furthermore, it is also difficult to obtain the old farmers' attire, such as black tabi socks and leggings.

A close analysis revealed that the baton handling suffers from a lack of successors, and the continuation of the neighborhood association that supports the annual festival is also in doubt. At this shrine, events, and festivals such as *mochi*-pounding contests and the annual festival have been carried out with the cooperation of the neighborhood association, women's groups, and children's groups. According to my mother, who served as a member of the neighborhood association a few years ago, there were not many volunteers for the neighborhood association and children's group positions. Moreover, the people supporting the festival are aging, and it is possible that it will become difficult to hold the annual festival in the future.

There is a further consideration. Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Shinmei Shrine served as a gathering place of people during festivals and events such as the annual festival, *mochi*-pounding contests, and Bon dance festivals. It was a valuable space where people of all ages in the community could come together and interact across generations. It could even be argued that many of the visitors to these festivals and events came primarily to interact with the local community and enjoy the food stalls, and they may have viewed the dedication of the baton handling as an exciting spectacle. Looking back, one informant indeed recalled well how he experienced it when he was young. In recent years, however, the sense of sacredness that comes with interacting with a divine presence seems to have diminished in the annual festival and other events at Shinmei Shrine. However, through interactions with the community as a collective group of people living in the area, one could gain a sense of belonging to the community, which Durkheim and other social scientists brought to lore.

Among the four elements mentioned as components of a festival, while the sense of sacredness may have been fading, it could be argued that the annual festival, which used to be held every year, seemed to fulfill the three elements of escapism from daily life, periodicity, and collective involvement. Using a lens of religious anthropology, one more matter is certain in this context: "Having special inference systems for tool handling confers a real advantage in

this domain, allowing humans (participants) fast and flexible acquisition of complicated tool making techniques” (Boyer 2001: 116). As Covid-19 crisis situation greatly improved in 2022 and 2023, participants received the resumption of this festival with a remarkable warmth and enthusiasm. Indeed, I had an intriguing realization that participants expressed various concepts and displayed symbolic patterns with prescriptions for particular sequences of actions to be performed at specific times and spaces, and with the expectation of particular results. Thus, it was not too surprising to note from contextualized conversations that the majority of residents still hoped that this valuable gathering place for people’s social interactions would continue in the future.

Case Study 3: Kasugai Festival

Kasugai city is northeast of Nagoya City in Aichi prefecture and has a population of approximately 309,000 inhabitants. The Shōnai River flows through the southern part of the city. The total area of the city is 92.78 square kilometres (35.82 sq mi). It is sometimes called Owarikasugai to avoid confusion with other municipalities of the same name, including Kasugai (now part of Fuefuki) in Yamanashi Prefecture. This city is known as the birthplace of Kono Michikaze, a master of calligraphy in the Heian period, and as the leading producer of cultivated cacti in Japan. These cacti are provided in school meals at local elementary and junior high schools and enjoyed by the citizens. The city is also famous for its popular mascots, *Tofu-kun* and the Cactus Trio, which are themed after Kono Michikaze and cacti. However, the Kasugai festival is not well-known outside Kasugai city. In what follows, I outline and analyze some salient data gleaned from Kasugai City’s official website, interviews with people who have participated in the festival, the festival pamphlet from 2022, and my own impressions from participation in festivals in the past.

Historically, the Kasugai Festival represents a traditional festival in Kasugai City. It was reportedly established in 1977, based on the fundamental principle of cultivating a hometown of culture and harmony. This festival thus includes many citizen-participatory events that bring participants together into one community, while reaffirming residents’ acute awareness to preserve their fading hometown (Kasugai Matsuri Jikkouinkai 2023). In 2008, precisely on the 65th anniversary of the city’s establishment, the Kasugai festival nevertheless experienced a significant shift from being a festival organized under the leadership of the administration to a festival organized now in collaboration between the citizens and the administration. The rationale behind this transition (shift) was to further emphasize citizen participation. Similarly, the festival aims to promote cross-generational and cross-community exchanges and contribute to a lively and vibrant city.

The Kasugai festival takes place for three days from October 14th to 16th in the central area of the city around Kasugai City Hall. This festival (including its eve ceremony) represents a major event in Kasugai City, attracting over 220,000 visitors and features various events that

fully utilize the distinctive features of the City. All these events converge to increasingly promote the “Dofu Heian Parade” and “Kasugai, the City of Calligraphy”, as it is the birthplace of Kono Michikaze, one of the three great calligraphers from the mid-Heian period, with a legendary connection to Kasugai (Kasugai Matsuri Jikkouinkai 2023). Some of the events include the calligraphy performance competition *Kasugai-za Shodo*, stage performances and exhibitions by local groups and elementary/junior high school students, a food tent called *Kanshaichi* (Thanksgiving Market), and a “Nationwide Local Specialty Store” that handles local products from all over Japan. There is likewise a popular hands-on event for children.

In particular, the food tent offers products and food made from edible cacti as part of promoting Kasugai City, known as the top producer of cacti in Japan. During the final stage performance, support goods are distributed to the audience, and the festival reaches its climax with the *Yosakoi* dance performance, during which participants experience their liminality, which represents a crucial phase of transformation, where individuals or groups experience a profound sense of change and disorientation.³ The rules of *Yosakoi* dancing are surprisingly simple: dancers have to proceed forward while holding *naruko* clappers in their hands, and the music needs to incorporate phrases from the *yosakoi-bushi* folk song. Beyond that, dance teams are free to create their own style of choreography. The second day, which is the main focus of the festival, is characterized by a parade (Figure 9). The parade includes performances by local groups such as dances, brass bands, and traditional arts, as well as the “Michikaze Heian Morning Procession,” which creates an atmosphere of the Heian period, attracting many spectators. The *Chigo Daigyoretsu*, featuring famous figures known as the “Three Footsteps,” including *Fujiwara no Yukinari*, *Fujiwara no Saimei*, and *Ono no Komachi*, parades through the city along with the procession, adding to the grandeur of the festival.

Recalling his previous experiences, one key informant vividly commented:

From my childhood to middle school years, I participated in the festival every year, which provided opportunities to see Tofu-kun and cacti, the city’s mascots, in various locations. I could also witness calligraphy performances, taste edible cacti, and try peach, a local specialty product, through the festival. It became a starting point for me to learn about the distinctive features of the city from a young age. When

³ Victor Turner (1974), an influential anthropologist and sociologist, introduced the concept (and label) of *liminality* as a crucial element in understanding the dynamics of ritual and social transformation. The term *liminality* thus originates from the Latin word *limen*, which means threshold. In Turner’s work, liminality refers to a state of ambiguity, disorientation, and transition, which occurs during various ritual processes, but it also holds significance in broader social and cultural contexts. Specifically, Turner’s exploration of liminality emerged from his study of rituals and rites of passage in various societies, especially among the Ndambu people of Zambia. He found that rituals often involved a three-stage process: separation, liminality, and incorporation. During the liminal phase, individuals or groups experience a period of being “betwixt and between,” where they are neither fully part of their former social structure nor fully integrated into the new one they are transitioning towards. It is a state of ambiguity and uncertainty, where normal social boundaries and hierarchies are temporarily suspended or blurred.



Figure 9. The Tofu-Heiancho Procession as the highlight of Kasugai Festival.

Source: Kasugai city, 07/12/2017.

I participated, I was impressed by the organizers and volunteers actively encouraging participation. The events were enjoyable for citizens of all ages and genders. I felt that these characteristics embodied the keyword “citizen-participatory.” In the future, I hope to not only participate but also contribute to the festival’s organization as a volunteer, allowing more citizens to experience the significance of the festival (Personal communication from a key informant, October 16, 2022).

Kasugai festival has a positive impact on the motivation of children in Kasugai City. Regardless of the level of completion, all students’ works are exhibited and empirical connections between participants are constructed. It transpired in interviews that the festival also plays a vital role in fostering communication between children and their grandparents and families. Moreover, a review of literature revealed that the “citizen-participatory” characteristic was evident throughout the Kasugai festival, which is effectively operated by many volunteers. This festival gives an opportunity for both the citizens of Kasugai and people from outside the city to become more familiar with the festival’s recognition and significance. It is evident, from the narratives and contextualized conversations, that residents and many observers wish for the continued prosperity of Kasugai City and the preservation of its traditional culture alongside the festival.

Case Study 4: Koromo Festival in Toyota City

Located in the center of Aichi Prefecture, Toyota City covers a vast area that accounts for 17.8% of Aichi Prefecture as a whole. Known as the “City of Cars” with one of the highest shipments of manufactured goods in Japan, Toyota City is highly regarded as a world-leading

manufacturing center. At the same time, it is a green city with abundant forests covering approximately 70% of the city area, the Yahagi River running through the city area, and fields that produce seasonal vegetables and fruits. Moreover, the city is aiming for further growth as a highly satisfying city where people can choose from a variety of lifestyles by taking advantage of the characteristics of each area. With a population of approximately 430,000, it is the second most populous city in Aichi Prefecture, after Nagoya.

Toyota City is widely recognized as home to the headquarters of the world-renowned Toyota Motor Corporation. In addition, the city has a large stadium, Toyota Stadium, which was the site of the World Cup Soccer Club Championships. There is also the Toyota City Museum of Modern Industry and Living, which was originally built in 1921 as the 9th branch of the Sericulture Control department and is now a national registered tangible cultural property. It was established in 2005 as a museum and cultural property to promote culture, arts, and education (Toyota City Official Travel Site 2022). The Museum building is notable for its peaceful atmosphere. In summary, the city is served by many pleasant environments and is an agreeable place in which to live. Although the western part of Toyota City is an area with many residential areas and offices, the eastern region is rich in nature and attracts many tourists in the fall, when many areas enjoy the changing leaves. Originally, Toyota City was initially mostly comprised of the current western part, but after merging with the current eastern region, it became, through accidents of history, the city with the vast area that it is today.

The Koromo Festival represents an elaborate festival held every fall, in the third weekend of October, in the present-day Toyota City (formerly Koromo-cho). It was initially established during the Edo period in the first half of the 1600s as a festival of the Koromo Taisha Shrine (Figure 10), and remarkably, continues to this day.

[However,] the first floats are thought to have been added in the mid-1700s, perhaps in response to

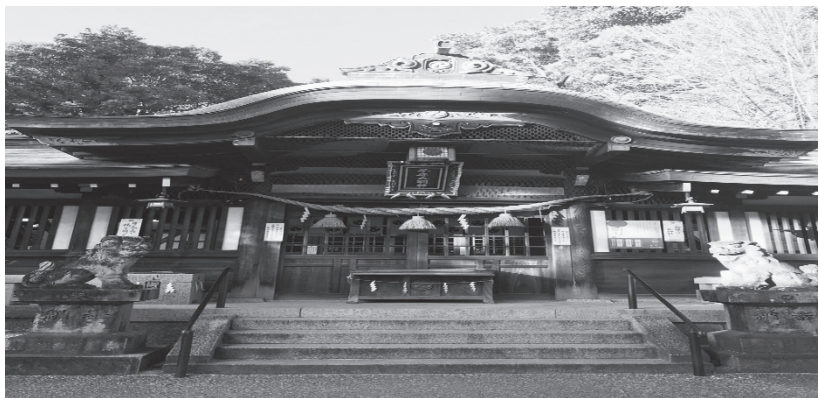


Figure 10. Koromo Taisha Shrine in Toyota City
Photo by the author, October 2022

regional trends, as many other festivals in the area now covered by Aichi and Gifu prefectures also use floats. Since 1778, each of the city's eight traditional neighborhoods have had their own float, and these are a significant source of local pride. Traditionally, the float procession would travel from Koromo shrine to Koromo castle (the present-day site of the Toyota Municipal Museum of Art) to entertain the local daimyo lord" (Japan Tourism Agency 2021: #3; see also Koromo Shrine 2022).

This festival has also long been closely associated with the Ise Jingu Shrine. That is perhaps the reason why it used to be held in conjunction with a festival held at Ise Jingu Shrine on a weekend. Essentially, the annual Koromo Festival aims to pray for a plentiful harvest in the coming year. It has been enjoyed by a wide range of people, from children to adults, simply because of its various stalls and events. Between 2019 and 2021, however, the festival was not held due to the required social distancing related to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was then resumed in the fall of 2022 with the cooperation of the whole local community. The overall festival comprises a two-day celebration that is centered on Koromo Shrine and has been a highlight on the local calendar for centuries.

The major highlight of this festival is the utilization of wooden wheeled-cars called *dashi* (floats): a box-like central section with a small stage in front, and another covered stage on top. The floats thus measure approximately 6 meters high and weigh up to 5 tons. Participants use a total of eight elaborately decorated floats which are paraded through the streets of central Toyota during this festival (Figures 11 and 12). At this point, it should be remembered in passing that there were not initially eight *dashi* used, as one observes them today. However, the number of *dashi* would have over the years increased to eight.



Figure 11. Paraded through the streets of central Toyota City during the Koromo Festival

Source: Koromo Festival Website, 2023.



Figure 12. Paraded through the streets of central Toyota City during the Koromo Festival

Photo by the author, October 2022

[Generally, large floats embody salient decorative features including] traditional lanterns, lacquered beams with gold fittings, gilded word carvings of auspicious creatures and plants, and embroidered tapestries depicting scenes from Japanese and Chinese history and mythology. Most interestingly, it takes dozens of well-coordinated crew members to maneuver a single float; during the festival the floats are pushed and pulled to the sound of rhythmical chanting (Japan Tourism Agency 2021: #2).

Here is the overall picture of the Koromo festival's two-day ritual practices and performances:

On the festival's first day, known as *Shingaku* (pre-celebration [or rehearsal] festival), the floats are maneuvered through their respective neighborhoods. During this time large floats are pulled through town and the *Shichido Mairi* event is held at night at the Koromo Shrine for the rehearsal festival. In the evening the crew leave their floats behind, purify themselves in the nearby Yahagi River, and gather at Koromo Shrine with lanterns in hand to circle the shrine grounds seven times in prayer. Seven is an auspicious number and is also a synonym for plenty.⁴

On the second day, known as *Hongaku* (main celebration), the floats are rolled onto the shrine grounds

⁴ The religiosity of number 7 is striking in this specific context. It seems fairly clear that a parallelism can be drawn here with the basic tenets of Christian spirituality, where the number 7 holds deep symbolism and significance. It represents divine completeness, perfection, and God's presence in the world. Throughout the Bible and Christian tradition and practices, the recurring appearance of the number 7 underscores the importance of spiritual fulfillment, ethical living, and the recognition of God's sovereignty. As believers seek to deepen their faith and understanding, the symbolism of the number 7 serves as a guiding principle in their spiritual journey.

to be shown off to the deities, and rituals and performances of sacred dance and music take place. The climax of this festival comes late in the afternoon when the floats are pushed back out into the city at high speed while crew members riding on them release colorful confetti over the audience. The festival thus ends with fireworks display in the evening (Japan Tourism Agency 2021: #4).

Another striking facet and representative event of this festival is the large amounts of confetti and massive fireworks displays that light up the sky over the Yahagi River at night and hence attracts many people every year (Figures 13 and 14). The inclusion of fireworks displays is in many ways indicative of the final intrinsic part of the festival. In a sense, this locally significant form of symbolism accurately reflects that of the traditional Maltese festivals celebrating Catholic patron saints, during which the participants intuitively experience the noise made by fireworks displays as a typically “cultural product” (Falzon and Cassar 2015: 145). The same experience of fireworks displays can undoubtedly be observed in certain colonial festivals in Mexico City (Curcio-Nagy 2004). The significance of fireworks displays goes beyond their visual appeal; they hold cultural symbolism and meanings, often serving as a powerful artistic expression of a community’s culture, values, shared identity, experiences (and collective consciousness), emotions and fond memories, while underpinning a source of pride and unity among its members.

It would be surprising if this was not the case. Looking back, one can indeed recall, from the lens of the anthropology of art, following Kisin and Myers’ (2019: 318) formulation, that this subtle ethnoaesthetics “approach had the effect, not the goal, from Boas [1955 (1927)] onward,



Figure 13. The confetti showering down in the tangible folk cultural property of Aichi Prefecture during the Koromo Festival in Toyota City
Source: Koromo Festival Website, 2023. <https://www.aichi-now.jp/en/spots/detail/1754/>



Figure 14. Fireworks displays during the Koromo Festival in Toyota City
Photo by the author, October 2022.

of demonstrating that all societies had activities involved with ‘aesthetics’, something more than utilitarian or just instrumental, in this way, participating, by contrast, in the Kantian identification of aesthetics with the non-instrumental, or as Bourdieu (1984) put it from the dominant sociological perspective, learned practices of ‘disinterested contemplation’ [of cultural objects”.] It is important to emphasize here that people’s consideration of the inclusion of these fireworks displays must be brought within the frame of analysis to understand the significance of such local aesthetics that highlight practices and protocols of cultural production themselves as meaningful sites of value.

In addition to this local aesthetic practice, the festival attracts people by scattering a lot of confetti. This detail may be less important than the fact that participants can now contextually consider all sorts of past and present occurrences in terms of blessings. Evidence appears to suggest that the scattering of confetti during the Koromo festival in Toyota City carries profound cultural and symbolic significance. From symbolizing fertility and abundance to fostering unity, joy, and purification, confetti become a powerful means of expression and celebration. It represents the community’s deep-rooted connection to nature, gratitude for blessings received, and hopes for a prosperous future. This ancient tradition continues to be a cherished part of Toyota City’s cultural heritage, preserving and passing down the values and spirit of the community from one generation to the next. Indeed, it transpired in the field that the amount of confetti every year is so great that it sometimes remains on the roadside even after this festival is over. However, it is worth noting that these confetti also have a solid meaning, and it is stated that the confetti are scattered to pray for God’s blessing on the city and its people. Therefore, it looks like a common practice for the locals to clear up and collect the confetti that have been spread. It is interesting to realize how these display practices are collaboratively generated.

On the whole, the crucial point to remember here about the Koromo festival is that its highlight represents a powerful event using elaborately decorated large *dashi* and the fireworks display. Both symbolic patterns thus emphasize a more performative framework that resonates with the development in many other societies' of practices favoring cultural performance festivals. It is not surprising that many tourists visit this festival every year as its ritual and spatial aspects attract them accordingly. In particular, I need to point out that the use of elaborately large floats during festivals in Japan exemplifies the rich complexity of cultural practices. As a reflexive ethnographic analysis reveals, these floats are not just objects of beauty and spectacle; they are powerful symbols of communal identity, intergenerational learning, and religious expression. While these traditions face challenges in a rapidly changing world, their preservation and continued celebration contribute to the resilience and richness of Japan's cultural heritage. In this connection, it is crucial to recognize that the Koromo festival has recently been making various efforts to increase the number of participants in the festival and hence ensure its survival and prosperity. One of these efforts is the creation of pamphlets written in English and Chinese on the festival website to attract foreign tourists. Equally important, festival organizers and other associate residents have been digitizing the information on *dashi* to reach a wider audience. Tourists coming from overseas are helpful in revitalizing the festival, and above all, the fact that people from outside of the country are interested in this festival will play a major role in keeping it alive.

Case Study 5: Handa Float Festival

During the Edo (Tokugawa) period (1603–1867), Handa was part of the Owari Domain. After the Meiji Restoration (1868), the modern municipal system was introduced on October 1, 1889. This resulted in the establishment of the towns of Handa and Kamezaki, along with the founding of Narawa in 1890. These three towns merged on October 1, 1937, forming the city of Handa. The city is located in the central eastern part of the Chita Peninsula, Aichi prefecture and its population reached 118,259 people in 51,846 households in 2019 (Handa City 2023). It “served as an important commercial port during the Edo period, when the local production of processed foods and cotton began” (Encyclopedia Britannica 2023: #2). Thereafter many shipping and brewing industries were established in the city and products were transported to all parts of the country using marine transportation. The city has developed into the political, economic, and cultural center of the Chita region. In particular, it is historically an industrial city renowned for two of Japan's most essential goods: sake and vinegar. With the money earned from these industries, Handa citizens-built floats in each district. The famous festival using these floats, both in the processions and rituals, is the *Handa Dashi (Floats) Festival* *はんだ出車まつり* under scrutiny here. For many, it is the perfect opportunity to compare and contrast the traditional floats dating back to the Edo period.

From the perspective of urban cultural anthropology, one can depict four symbolic aspects of Handa City. The first symbol is the *kura* (storehouses). Indeed, “many *kura* brewing

warehouses with their distinctive black wooden walls line a 500m stretch of old Handa even now” (Glenn 2011: #3). These are typical of the brewing industry, and still remain along the Handa Canal. The second important symbol is the Niimi Nankichi Memorial Museum. The site is dedicated to the famous author of *Gongitsune*, known as the “Hans Christian Andersen of Japan,” who was “born, raised in Handa City, and died there 30 years later” (Glenn 2011: #5). The area along the Yakatsu River, which appears vividly in *Gongitsune*, is a popular tourist spot with *higanbana* (cluster amaryllis) blooming every year. The third symbol is the Handa Red Brick Building, one of the largest existing brick buildings representing the living vestige of the Meiji era. Built in 1898 as a beer factory, it is now a registered tangible cultural property of Japan and designated a Heritage of Industrial Modernization by the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry. The fourth and final symbol of Handa City is undoubtedly the Handa Dashi festival, which has been celebrated once every five years in October since 1979 (Ono 2017). It is reported that the second festival was especially “held in 1987 as the 50th anniversary event of the city. Since then the festival has been held in October once every 5 years to this day” (Nippon-kichi 2008: #3). The 2023 celebration will be held on October 28–29.

[Perhaps] the unique thing about the Handa Dashi Matsuri is that although all the floats are religious, it is not a religious festival. It is just a tourist event started in 1979. The local Junior Chamber of Commerce started the festival to mark its 15th anniversary. From 1987, they decided to hold it every 5 years. So it is held on years ending with a “2” or “7.” [However,] the 31 floats are religious [simply] because they come from 10 neighborhoods in Handa, and each belong to a Shinto shrine in their respective neighborhoods. [Therefore, it can be argued that] they hold their own religious festival every spring. And every 5 years, they all line up in a large parking lot for this Handa Dashi Matsuri (Ono 2017: #2–3).

The sumptuous Handa Dashi festival has a history of more than 300 years and represents one of the most famous festivals in Handa City with Japan’s greatest parade float festival, enlisting approximately 31 dashi. During the festival the 31 impressive floats get together from 10 different districts of Handa City. This suggests that each of the Handa City’s 10 districts has at least 2 to 4 dashi. In 2023, for example, these elaborately decorated large floats were distributed by district as follows: (i) 乙川 Okkawa District (4 floats), (ii) 岩滑 Yanabe District (2 floats), (iii) 岩滑新田 Yanabe Shinden District (2 floats), (iv) 上半田田 Kami-Handa District (Chintoro festival, 2 floats), (v) 協和 Kyowa District (2 floats), (vi) 成岩 Narawa District (4 floats), (vii) 西成岩 Nishi-Narawa District (2 floats), (viii) 板山 Itayama District (4 floats), (ix) 下半田 Shimo-Handa District (4 floats), and (x) 亀崎 Kamezaki District (潮干祭 Shiohi festival, 5 floats). It transpired in the interviews that more than 4000,000 people used to participate in this grand festival. Despite this, however, locals “had to overcome many problems (mostly egotistical, financial, and logistical) before they could get all 31 floats to agree to gather together every five years [...] The [festival] in 2012 attracted over 500,000 spectators” (Ono 2017: #4).

Since the Edo period, brewing and other industries have flourished, and the accumulated

wealth has enabled each district to build its own dashi. Since their creation in the Edo period, however, they have often been repaired, remodeled, and even rebuilt, and used for a long time. Perhaps the oldest document on the topic is the *Okkawa Festival Dashi Drawing* produced in 1755 (Aichi Dashi Matsuri Nippon Ichi Council 2018), which depicts four dashi still known today.

Dashi are eight-meter-tall, ornately carved, elaborately decorated wooden floats. They look more like cars or portable shrines, each “weighing three to six tons, that requires forty to sixty



Figure 16-1. 31 of floats gathered at once every five years in an awesome display of beauty and tradition during the sumptuous Handa Floats Festival

Source: Aichi Now, 2017.



Figure 16-2. A lineup of 31 floats gathered during the sumptuous Handa Floats Festival

Source: Identity Nagoya, 2016.

people pulling ropes to parade it through the town” (Orenstein and Cusack 2024, forthcoming ebook). In fact, the most significant attraction of them is their beautiful decoration (Figures 16–1 and 16–2). It is no accident that several residents interviewed through online survey proudly indicated that the quality and quantity of the carvings that are placed all over the colossal dashi are the best in Japan. The gold and silver embroidered curtains and lanterns are also artistic decorations (Figure 17).

The *ohayashi* and *karakuri* mechanized puppet dolls found on the tall-dashi are also fascinating and vary from region to region. Every spring, festivals are held in each district in turn, highlighting various attractions.⁵ Among them, however, it bears observing that the Tidal Festival in Kamezaki district is particularly famous, having been registered as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Site in 2016 (GaijinPot Travel 2023). According to legend, the Tidal Festival originated in the late 15th century, when warriors who arrived in the area held a festival in response to the growing population.

Ritually, the focal point of this festival is when five heavy dashi go into the sea. In honor of the legend that the festival deity landed from the sea, the five heavy floats that accompany the procession and return of the portable shrines are pulled down to the beach at low tide by teams of 30 to 40 men in colorful Happi coats and traditional garb, lined up in horizontal rows with only a short distance between them, and pulled back up again to land in this heroic festival.



Figure 17. Gorgeous curtains of floats carefully embroidered with gold and silver threads and rare giant *karakuri* dolls used during the sumptuous Handa Floats Festival

Source: Identity Nagoya, 2016.

⁵ At this point, it should be noted in passing that while it might be too long to wait until the next *dashi matsuri* (floats festival) featuring all 31 floats, each district of Handa City celebrates its individual floats festival annually during spring.

“Meanwhile, sitting comfortably inside each float are the musicians who play Japanese flutes and drums” (Gaijin Pot Travel 2023: #3). As Glenn (2011: #1) reports, the streets of Handa City are thus “lined with thousands of onlookers, all cheering the teams on and thoughtfully enjoying the spectacle and exciting atmosphere. At night, the floats are lit up by hundreds of traditional lanterns and again paraded through the town.” Indeed, many tourists visit Kamezaki to participate in this festival.

Another rather famous area is the Kami-Handa district. It holds a yearly Tintoro Festival. The performance is simple: in the evening, two boats (*dashi*) with many lanterns float on the pond. The “*tintoro* boats” are said to be the “*makiwara* boats” of Tsushima’s Tenno Festival, which were introduced during the Bunka and Bunsei eras. In Yoimiya especially, each boat is decorated with 12 lanterns representing the 12 months of the year with other lanterns for the 365 days of the year in a hemispherical shape around the 12 lanterns on the boat’s main pillar. Thus, the view of the lights of the lanterns reflected on the water is fantastic and intriguing. It transpired in interviews and contextualized conversations that *dashi* from these districts come together once every five years in the fall. This is in fact the primary feature of the Handa Dashi Festival. Thus, many people visit Handa City just to participate in this majestic festival event, which is a major event merely because a total of 31 *dashi* are gathered for its performance. As participants experience unique situations, they simultaneously assume that they display religious representations as well as their cultural ethos in specific modern urban environments. I was told that the festival has so far been held eight times and the number of active participants has been increasing every year.

From the above-outlined findings, it is clear that the Handa Float Festival ultimately represents a major event held once every five years in Handa City. Thirty-one floats from ten districts in the city gather in one place to form a magnificent festival held throughout Handa City. Thirty-one impressive floats can be seen side by side in a row, vastly entertaining a large crowd of onlookers. The number of spectators has increased from 80,000 at the first festival to as many as 550,000 at the eighth festival. Much more can be said on these matters, but for the purposes of the present analysis, five features in particular stand out. The first is that this traditional and magnificent float festival depicts the symbolism of the colossal and hefty floats. Indeed, the quality and quantity of the many carvings on the floats are reportedly the best in Japan. Historically, Handa’s floats are a traditional culture that has been handed down since the Edo period. One of the characteristics of these elaborately decorated wooden floats is that they are built tall, and some of them are the equivalent of the third floor of a building and over 8 meters high. Of the 31 floats that appear in the Handa Float Festival, 20 of them use *karakuri* dolls for the performance. The floats’ elaborate wood carvings and *karakuri* dolls that are highly valued overseas, and in 2016, five of the 31 floats— rich in tradition and valuable as works of art and crafts-manship—were registered as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.

The second striking feature points to the three types of curtains on the magnificent floats: the *ōmaku* 大幕 (side and back curtains), *mizuhiki* 水引 (festive cords, watermark), and *oimaku*

追幕 (farewell curtain). Some of these are adorned with exquisite embroidery, incorporating gold and silver threads, inspired by the designs of renowned Japanese artists such as Kishi Koma Ganku 岸駒谷駒 and Fukuda Suikō 福田翠光. The curtains are characterized by fine embroidery and beautiful thread colors.

The third feature of the festival entails the carvings, which are skillfully decorated *karaki* white wood carvings. Viewed through the lens of Japanese folklore, however, one immediately notices that the subjects are diverse, including dragons, Chinese lions, peonies, hermits, Japanese mythology, history, people, flowers, and animals. In addition, there are beautiful works by two famous sculptors from Handa City, Tsuneko Carving and Tsunejiro Niimi.

The fourth striking feature, and perhaps one of the most spectacular event features of the Handa Float festival, is the *Yoimatsuri*. As the name suggests, the *Yoimatsuri* is a festival held from dusk to night. But there is more. The magnificent floats are elaborately decorated and lit up with lanterns. This allows the floats, which looked good during the day, to change at night as they beautifully decorate the streets of Handa.

The final, but not the least crucial, event feature is the presence of two boats called *Chintoro-bune in the evening*. This is essentially a festival culture handed down in Aichi Prefecture. Each boat is decorated with 12 lanterns representing the 12 months of the year on the boat's main pillar, with other lanterns representing the 365 days of the year, meaning one year, arranged around the pillar in a hemispherical shape (GaijinPot Travel 2023). It is sufficient to emphasize here that the presence of such boats in this majestic festival event has a single consequence: people build in a way that each boat floats down the river and produces the richest set of inferences with the least cognitive effort. The large number of lanterns decorated in a circle is very powerful. Obviously, the sight of them flowing is fantastic and very beautiful.

The following historical sequences of the performance can be established: the first Handa Float Festival was held with the cooperation of the city's float groups, led by the Handa Junior Chamber of Commerce, and realized the citizens' dream of having a full lineup of 31 floats. According to the Handa Float Festival Preservation Association (Handa City 2022c), the number of spectators was 80,000 at the first festival. The second festival was then held to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Handa City. After the completion of the festival, it was decided to hold the festival regularly every five years to coincide with the city's anniversary. The third festival was held over a period of two days, and for the first time, the *Yoimatsuri* and the boat floats were held overnight. On the day before the festival, a "National Float Festival Forum" was held for the first time in Japan. For the fourth festival, a pier was set up especially for spectators for the first time. The day before the festival, the "First Japan Summit of *Yamato* (float), *Hoko* (float), and *Yatai* (cart) Towns" was held. During the fifth festival, the festival area was expanded to include the area in front of the Meitetsu Chita-Handa Station. The sixth Summit was held under the theme of "Polarization," and for the first time, fireworks were displayed at two locations during the *Yoimatsuri*, and a procession of *chochin* (lanterns) was

held, in which tourists could also actively participate. The seventh festival was held under the theme of “Den,” with the Genpei Bridge venue newly added, as well as a Chita Peninsula tourism product exhibition, and stage events. By the eighth event, the audience had grown remarkably to 550,000 (Handa Dashi Matsuri Committee 2023).

The theme of the 9th HANDA Yama Matsuri Festival, which will be held for the first time in six years, is “Kei (joy),” which expresses the hope that citizens, the community, and everyone will work together to hold the festival and share the joy of overcoming the Corona disaster (Handa city 2022b: #4).

All these complex ritual components and participants’ actions assume that the Handa Float Festival, which has grown every year, has provided economic benefits to Handa City. Why is this festival so exciting and powerful? From an ethnological point of view, the peculiar reason lies in the content of the festival itself, which increases every year. It is thus designed to unify the minds of the people and to ask the gods to lend their power. This has long been an overwhelming experience simply because it can get very crowded. By adding more small events and even creating events for different age groups, the mimic quality of the festival becomes “integral to what makes participants potentially able to capture the senses and to be rendered spectacular, to attract more visitors from around the world who seek to immerse themselves in Japan’s unique cultural tapestry. As actions are repeated or ritualized, they become increasingly open to creative possibilities and experimentation” (Addo 2009: 226).

Strategically, the area is also being expanded so that more people can actively participate, and more visitors be attracted. The festival organizers have also been raising the level of publicity in many ways. Interestingly, the Handa Float Festival is now broadcast live throughout the country, and its name recognition has spread on a national scale. More generally, digest programs of the festival are broadcast, showing the assembly of the floats, the process of pulling the floats around, and the showing of the *karakuri* puppets. Commercials using past footage have also been distributed, attracting the attention of a wider audience. All this is simple enough but also delineates the extent to which the Handa float festival, like many other single ritualized festivals observed previously, has been able to attract repeat visitors by trying something new each time and has, therefore, become a more exciting event. From the vantage point of sustainable community, one notices that the revenue generated from these efforts to attract visitors considerably enriches the economy of Handa City. Thus, it is interesting to realize from my informants’ narratives that the proceeds are used for the next festival, thus improving the level of the festival yearly.

Reference has already been made to the fact that Handa Float Festival represents the largest event on the Chita Peninsula. One informant reported that over the past decades it has become increasingly popular, thanks to the combined efforts of citizens, businesses, and the government. It is also gaining national recognition. Perhaps the most important thing to be gained from such a large festival, and perhaps one of the main reasons for its longevity, is the connection between residents and the combined power of the common people, which have

generated what Greenblatt (1988) aptly coined as *social energy*. In this vein, one informant described the way in which this festival has been instrumental in rallying the local people and bringing the community together. It inevitably impressed on me during the field observation that although the people involved in the Handa Float Festival come from all ages, genders, and occupations, they work together eagerly to create a single festival. Perhaps, without these inter-societal connections, the festival would not be possible. Another significant role of this festival is to potentially keep the charm of Handa's traditional delicate and glittering floats alive for future generations. This can be passed on not only to the citizens of Handa, but also to people in other prefectures, by sharing this tradition. Though it would be premature to predict a spread affect from one generation to another within and outside of the concerned localities, I think that this perspective of things accurately reflects the comment cogently made by one of my chief informants:

In this day and age of depopulation and declining birthrates in rural areas, I believe that in order for this traditional event to continue to be carried on, it is important to involve not only the younger generation of local people but also people from outside the community. First of all, it is necessary for people to see the festival and learn about its charms. It is necessary to continue to pass on the tradition.

Discussion: Festival as a Spectacle, Cultural Negotiation of Identity, and Sub-Cultural Network

I have thus far focused on five case studies to emphasize that cultural performance festivals held annually by locals in Japan have a rich history, deeply rooted in the country's traditional customs and religious practices. Just as with many other collective events closely observed by researchers in different parts of the world (Getz 2010), so too these tranquil and highly centered festivals have constantly evolved over time, incorporating both ancient and modern cultural elements, thus keeping them vibrant and relevant in contemporary Japan (Toba 2021; Jesty 2020). Through the promotion of festivals as celebrations of tradition, culture, and the indomitable spirit of the Japanese people, one can notice the extent to which rural and urban communities have been increasingly keen to share their culture, environment, and spending opportunities with visitors. Celebrated for centuries, festivals like the Gion Matsuri in Kyoto and the Nebuta Matsuri in Aomori, for example, symbolize the fusion of indigenous customs with influences from neighboring regions. Conversely, it is worth noting that these collective events, by being historically embedded in local communities, play a vital role in influencing "the identities of people and place and all processes related to festivals influence the need to belong" (Jaeger and Mykletun 2013: 213). Such local traditional cultural festivals are equally instrumental in cultural diplomacy, projecting soft power and enhancing a nation's global image. There is some evidence to suggest that the Japanese government actively supports the international dissemination of its culture through these festivals, fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. In particular, consideration of how these ritualized festivals

are established, how the nature of their performance is broadly embodied and expressed through various forms of arts, and which individuals are involved in their initiation and regular staging, have offered us opportunities for anthropological research. This scientific inquiry became more pronounced for me in the specific context of Japan, where there appears to be thus far only a relatively small and disparate amount of regional anthropological literature on this intriguing subject.

It then emerged from analysis that the significance of these collective events—as pivotal means of facilitating social cohesion (through citizen participation and promotion of tourism) and regional identity (with its cultural and symbolic power connections), and with these being, no doubt, the reasons for their enormous popularity forces us to grasp the uniqueness (and perhaps the hidden memories) of Japanese societies. In a sense, this facet of the study delineates the extent to which “the motivational capacity of the identity formation processes might be one central component that makes these events sustainable” in specific settings (Baumeister and Leary 1995, reviewed by Jager and Mykletun 2013: 223). In this specific context, residents are proud representatives of their cultures and their religions, or rather, of their religiously oriented cultures. Thus, festival participants seemingly hold religious ideals that point to the same understanding within their local communities: living, sharing, and preserving the basic tenets of the tradition bequeathed to them by their deceased predecessors or righteous ancestors.

More than a decade ago Marcus (2010: 168) nimbly argued that contemporary fieldwork is, above all, a “social symbolic imaginary with certain posited relations among things, people, events, places, and cultural artifacts.” In this light, I was able to establish sufficient rapport with a few members of my sample communities to examine the nature, facets, and extents of these ritualized festivals and to have them described to me. My overall observation is that the aspects of festivals under scrutiny here, naturally, are also found in other ritualized festivals not mentioned in this study, many of whose features include strikingly sacred experiences, aesthetic connections, and prominent spiritual figures and are highly regarded as “sacred/spiritual spaces” (Standaert 2009: ix). Perhaps a stunning example is Gion Matsuri (Teeuwen 2023), one of the most famous festivals in Japan, which originated in the 9th century and was initially held as a purification ritual to appease the deities. Moreover, it transpired in narratives that these collective events—with their rigid requirements regarding places, scripts, protocols, actors, and instruments—play a crucial role ethnologically in preserving and transmitting traditional customs and cultural heritage, the aims of which loom as a dominant concern in the ethos of the locals. On the surface, most informants interviewed apparently have some idea of when and why the festivals were established, how they have been performed, and what they have gained from them yearly, and why they have been strongly attached to their respective cultural idioms, religious beliefs, and practices.

The general point is not new. Having discussed such a question in his work, Teeuwen (2023) has indeed good evidence that Gion Matsuri is not just a festival; it is the embodiment of

centuries of tradition and cultural heritage. What is new, on the other hand, is that one now has a much better description of how such festivals display a dynamic interplay between many cultural institutions: cherished symbols, values, memories, and emotions, as well as a sense of community membership and identity. If I may speculate, I would add that, while such a concern is not unusual, the evidence by category suggests that its ceremonial aspects—briefly sketched out in this study—and associate philosophy are unique. That is precisely the reason I have been of the opinion that one imperatively needs to understand the distinctive aspects of these ritualized festivals within their original contexts. Why is that so? Because this accurately reflects the primary objective of cultural anthropology (Ferraro 2012: xiii). On the practical level, such an anthropological principle may be seen as applicable to anyone who truly wants to understand the inherent logic of why Japanese people culturally think and behave the way they do. This subtle point also considers that the descriptions of my informants on their own cultural practices, in this view, would be more likely to reflect indigenous categories. In this light, Keesing's (2012: 6) postulation is straightforward:

Trying to find the rationality behind the behavior of the “other” brings us face-to-face with rationality (or lack thereof) of our own cultural assumptions. Once confronted, many experienced cultural anthropologists come to the same conclusion as did Keesing (1992: 77) several decades ago: the best that any ethnographer can ever hope to become is “an outsider who knows something of what it is to be an insider”

In these specific socio-cultural and psycho-religious contexts, it has been recognized in anthropology and sociology of religion that participants' actions are always tremendously variable within the acceptable formal boundaries of behavior, which communicates a particular idea (Schechner 2003, reviewed by Addo 2009: 226). In light of the *celebration of society* (Manning 1983) in contemporary settings, it is equally clear that these ritualized festivals display communities' expressions of both tradition and modernity, and in some instances, depicted here, in terms of tourism and commodification of culture, the theme of audience playing the performer. This is obviously a good explanation, as it acknowledges one empirical observation: “With festivals and other events made more appealing by gazing upon ourselves in the act of gazing upon others, the boundary between performers and audiences is highly porous” (Addo 2009: 228). Perhaps one who is not familiar with ritual practices may wonder how to account for this. From the anthropologist's viewpoint, however, “it seems plausible that the rituals create the need they are supposed to fulfill and [it is] probable that each reinforces the other” (Boyer 2001: 20). This subtle assertion is thus relevant to the theme of this foregoing discussion merely because it accurately reflects one empirical observation of festival as a form of “cultural display [that] can be potentially powerful spaces of cultural negotiation” (Donnelly 2016: 1). Indeed, it is rare to find people performing such ritualized festivals annually without any purpose or expectation of particular results. Why do they spend all their time and resources doing all this?

Lacking space to cover all these developments in depth, I concentrate on explaining the

fundamental ideas of four components for displaying social interactions and vitality of religious outlook in my empirical cases: representation of the past, behavior, aesthetics, and community identity. On this basis and considering several conceptions of the audience from my research samples, I more precisely rely in the forthcoming discussion on my in-depth interviews with key informants and Millicent Weber's theoretical assumptions to argue that "the individual experience of a participant may have several dimensions: aesthetic, cognitive, affective, and social. It is sufficient to emphasize here that each of these dimensions is intertwined with personal values, history, taste, and expectations" (Weber 2015: 90–91).

The first feature relates to behavior patterns. In particular, it is clear that through elaborate performances, whose markedness is indexed by an outer limit of sharply festive behavior similar to that of a spectacle, it is readily apparent that via traditional music, dance, and costume, cultural performance festivals allow the younger generations to connect with their roots. Here, it should be further emphasized that the correlation between relic ownership and ritualized festivals underlines the continuing retention of supernatural beliefs, religious practices, and ideals of participants in the least restricted localities. Perhaps the most important feature cultural anthropologists (including myself) bring to the study of Japanese festivals is an examination of the ways in which people walk, dance, play music, and eventually consider their treatment of time and space.

Interesting in these ritualized festivals, although unfortunately not fully elaborated, is that main performers also communicate non-verbally in a number of different ways. For example, they communicate through body language such as gestures, facial expressions, postures, giant size, body movement, and eye contact. They communicate by touching others or by withholding physical contact. Yet however much research has identified body temperature and body heat as sensorial aspects of spectacles (Addo 2009: 229), it is readily apparent that religious emotions (Riis and Woodhead 2012) has a direct effect (perhaps consciously or unconsciously) on the size of participants' festival territory (setting). More importantly, festival performers communicate by artifacts they put on their bodies. Such things as clothing (costume), makeup, and their spatial distance, and performance arrangement sends various messages in different cultures.

During a typical festival, it has been reported that music, cacophony, or language (concomitant erasure of Japanese language) may be significantly at play in disseminating specific messages and meanings, entailing Austin's (1962) notion of "performative" and the acknowledgement in sociolinguistics that "ritualized performances are creative, rather than merely re-creative (Bauman 1975; Tambiah 1979, reviewed by Addo 2009: 229). One matter is certain: In this festival atmosphere, the audience members find themselves in a situation of being "actively engaged participants and this engagement is [readily] intellectual as well as emotional and intimate" (Driscoll 2015, reviewed by Jansa 2017: 200). Much more interesting for festival research, it has often been suggested specifically that "repeated performance is revealing of underlying social structures which are 'emergent in action'. [Evidently, this facet of

study, in other words, implies one situational consideration:] for utterances or actions to be ritually efficacious, they must set up the appropriate conditions for agents to receive them as such” (Hymes (1975, reviewed by Addo 2009: 229).

Thus, the overall picture of these collective events that one may get from these case studies is that of the “sounds of silence” (Hall et al 2012: 16) that the ethnographer imperatively needs to grasp in the field. In addition, a micro-analysis of myths, folk tales, and narratives in these ritualized festivals revealed the degree to which residents considered that their deceased predecessors and righteous ancestors should be remembered, re-imagined, and praised over generations. Conversation with key informants further revealed that a few still remain instrumental in transmitting (orally and in writings) long-proven social religious values and passing them on (with little or no distortion of content) to the younger generation. Along with the storytelling and writing, one can add the too-often overlooked *silent transmission* of central tenets of the local community through the very real presence and cultural preservation activities of individual practitioners and families in both private and public spheres. I draw attention to this most frequently overlooked consideration merely because I have been of the opinion that “history is not only shaped by stories that are told, but also by those that are silenced or forgotten” (Climbo and Cattel 2002: 163). At this point, and borrowing Boyer’s (2002) formulation, the fundamental concern is, therefore, plain: “All this is familiar, indeed so familiar that for a long-time anthropologists forgot that this component or propensity requires explanation.”

Second, perhaps most important for our purposes, festival participants observed in this research ultimately demonstrated striking facets of devotion, faith, and participation, and they then repeated cyclical and learned aspects that are integral to ritual behavior, which has social effects of producing harmony, solidarity, and common identification. In so observing, I intuitively assumed that they reaffirm important cultural, socio-political, and religious periods of time, making them sacred moments. This description is aptly akin to Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1983) suggestion that festivals act as “invented traditions” that reinforce a sense of community, collective identity, and continuity with the past. Similarly, it transpired in in-depth interviews that festivals allow participants to “merge sacred and secular on their own terms or to invert the normal settings for encountering phenomena so termed. In so doing, agents are able to reverse and moreover reinvent the particular class configurations of their inter-societal connections” (Addo 2009: 226). In this respect, I underlined, for previous festivals studied, the notion that individuals try to construct, in the varied interactions between human agents and religious communities, human agents and objects of devotion and sacred symbols. This translation of the reality of the “regime of religious emotions” (Riis and Woodhead 2012) into constant mental images of their social worlds is a longstanding principle in cognitive psychology. Emotion and religion are both located here more precisely in social and cultural contexts.

From anthropological and sociological perspectives, it is probably accurate to state that all

the ritualized festivals under scrutiny here make participants potentially able to behave and express themselves naturally (especially in the state of liminality) with more abandon than in everyday settings. This is crucial, because festival participants often seek meaning and bring authenticity to their own lives through experiencing such cultural practices beyond their own life spheres. All this implies some basic questions: Why do participants have such thoughts? What prompts them to do such things? Why are they so committed to them? One orthodox explanation here relates to the interplay of dynamic components: while festival participants create a form of “staged authenticity” (MacCannell 1976, 1999), they simultaneously derive pleasure or enthusiasm from the spectacle of themselves looking at or consuming others (Kirshenbalt-Gimblett 1998, reviewed by Addo 2009: 228). In fact, these three scholars put us on the right track, because the ritualized festivals I closely observed equally tend to adopt representations and symbolic patterns that are good for social cohesion. In a similar way, Yang’s (2020) study has recently shown that “structural relations potentially influence both individual and behaviors and systematic outcomes in ways not reducible to entity characteristics (Yang 2020: 12, 16). Inexplicably, network analysts have conducted little research on the connections among diverse domains of relational content. In the context of ritualized festivals, as I have several times mentioned, many different components and social interactions are at work, producing particular inferences, especially when one thinks about the interplay dynamics between participants. This appears to be a fruitful relational explanation favored by the performance analysts.

The third important feature to be considered here highlights the extension of the festival reproduction through repetition. How is this accounted for? Indeed, in the anthropology of religion especially, “repetition” in ritual actions refers to the recurring and structured practices that hold symbolic meaning within a religious context. These repeated actions serve to reinforce beliefs, create a sense of identity, and establish a connection with the sacred, contributing to the cohesion and continuity of religious traditions. To see this in a more precise way, let us consider the following words of Bloch (2005).

It means that what is involved in ritual is conscious “repetition”, either of oneself or, much more often and much importantly, of others whom one has seen or heard perform the ritual before. All rituals thus involve what can be called “quotation”, if we use the term to refer not just to language, but to all repetitions of originators. These originators must have some sort of authority, and this authority justifies quoting them, as in the Lord’s Prayer or the Christian communion service. Familiar statements given to anthropologists by participants in rituals, such as “We do this because it is the custom of the ancestors,” “We do this because it is what one does at these events,” or “We do this because we have been ordered to act in this way,” imply conscious quotation. Therefore, the inevitable implication of such statements is that, for both participants and onlookers, it is not just the specific present context of time and place that frames the intentionality of the acts of the ritual actor and that is relevant to fully understanding them, but also the past time and space context of specified, or unspecified, previous occurrences of the repeated/quoted acts. As Humphrey and Laidlaw put it [...], “ritualization transforms the relation between intention and the meaning of action” (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 90, quoted by Bloch 2005: 125).

It is, therefore, natural to draw a conclusion from Bloch's (2005) insights that the concept of "repetition" in ritual actions refers to the recurrent and meticulously performed behaviors within a ritual context. These actions are often symbolic and laden with cultural significance, serving to reinforce collective beliefs and social norms. Through repetition, rituals create a sense of continuity and stability in society, instilling a shared identity and providing a framework for understanding the world. The repetition of these actions helps to solidify and perpetuate cultural traditions and values, fostering a collective memory that strengthens social cohesion and maintains cultural continuity across generations. At this point I should perhaps close this short survey with one more crucial consideration. Returning to firmer ground, Addo (2009: 228–229) is certainly right that

the power dynamic set up between oneself as performer and oneself as audience reinforces the potential for [ritualized festival and] spectacle to be continually reproduced at large scale events and for the ritualization of [festival and] spectacle through repetition as rites. Adding a critical focus on the politics of one's own tourism of oneself illuminates social behavior during modern festivals and opens up further scholarly avenues to engage with commodification of [festival and] spectacle. [That is perhaps the reason it is alleged that anthropology] with its holistic, cross-cultural, and self-reflexive approach [appears to be] one of the disciplines best positioned to undertake such a task (Addo 2009: 228–229) [and thus finds meaning in the rationale behind the ethnographic-centered event approach adopted in the present study.]

There remain two other sub-features of these ritualized festivals: creativity and flexibility. Although cultural performance festivals in Japan are deeply rooted in tradition, it is interesting to note that they can just as well exhibit elements of artistic innovation and adaptation to contemporary influences. This facet of the study thus reveals the extent to which participants affirm themselves in the festival setting by producing important indicators and symbolic patterns. A further consideration here amounts to a greater apprehension of local traditional cultural festivals as "a phenomenon where categories keep evolving and where the field of festivals represent a continuous dialogue between several different ideologies and different spatialities and times" (Fjell 2007: 130). Thus, it is not too surprising that many other festivals and related spectacles display similar representations of ritual processes. A case in point is participants' experience in Noh Theatre, a classical Japanese theatrical form which has evolved over time, incorporating new themes, techniques, and interpretations (for illustrations of the secret of Noh masks, see Udaka 2010). Indeed, as Kominz (2011) argues, "Noh's resilience lies in its ability to adapt and reinterpret traditional stories for contemporary audiences." Conversely, although more data are still needed in this area, I can anticipate positing that the existing Japanese cultural performance festivals contribute significantly to local economies and tourism, while adding vibrancy to the cultural scene. In fact, my structural approach here emphasizes that these ritualized festivals attract both domestic and international visitors, stimulating local businesses, hotels, and transportation services. In this specific context and with reference to the present cultural anthropological theorizing, it is time to reveal that —to my knowledge at least— one can consider the Awa Odori festival in Tokushima prefecture (Toba 2021) as a prime example of a festival that has become a major tourist attraction,

contributing (albeit not automatically) to sustainable local economic development.

Perhaps one possible functionalist explanation here is that most cultural performance festivals in contemporary settings have been transformed from local traditions into cultural tourism events that generate significant revenue (O'Sullivan and Jackson (2002)). These ritualized festivals, although their material culture has historically been affected in a hierarchical and male-oriented Japanese society (Fukutake 1989), significantly serve as ambassadors of Japanese culture on the global stage. As cultural anthropologists (including myself) know, most festival participants provide international audiences with a glimpse into the country's rich artistic traditions and historical legacy. It would be surprising if this had not been the case. Looking back, one recalls how the vibrant and mesmerizing performances of Japanese cultural festivals have long captivated audiences worldwide, enhancing the global appreciation of Japanese cultural heritage. This view, widely prevalent among Asian nationalist scholars and elsewhere in the world, once again proves that these local traditional cultural festivals and many others not analyzed here have, through cultural exchanges, facilitated global engagement, making Japan an attractive destination for travelers interested in experiencing its unique traditions.

These ritualized festivals have over decades proven to be successful, with enduring popularity. Empirical investigations into this field have indeed identified five dimensions of festival participants' motivation: socialization, cultural exploration, novelty/regression, recovery, and puerility (Getz 2010; Kocabulut and Kiliçarslan 2017, to name but a few). Viewed from the perspective of critical insights, however, one cannot lose sight of the field observation that the festivals face various challenges in contemporary Japanese society, especially when their space becomes intertwined with global structures. Perhaps the most important insights that many cultural anthropologists (including myself) bring to the discussion within a broader context is the balance between tradition and modernization that poses a constant challenge, as organizers strive together to preserve authenticity while adapting to changing audience expectations. Commercialization is another significant concern, since the popularity of festivals may compromise their authenticity and re-construction of identity. In this vein and referring to the Drunken Dragon Festival in Macao, Choi, Imon, and Conto (2020: 1) go even further to cogently observe the potential risks of compromising the (objective) authenticity of festivals that people experience in the liminal space due to increasing "commercialization and touristification, or festivalization." As festivals gain popularity, there is a need to strike a balance between commercial appeal and preserving the festivals' cultural integrity in the process of glocalism.

In spite of continuing vigorous debate, empirical research conducted by Fjell (2007: 132, *italics is my emphasis*), seemingly found nuanced evidence that

"tourism and events like festivals create the exotic; the locals or *others* are presented in this conception as *the real deal*. Authenticity is thereby confused with the exoticization of place and event, in which both, the place and the event, may simply be constructed elements of an economic strategy. However, there are

several strategies bound to the interrelationship between festivals and tourism. The aspect of strengthening local identity, culture and designated place is one, and the political strategy of providing people with cultural experience thus strengthening their political status and power, is another.”

Additionally, my field observation raises concerns about cultural appropriation and misrepresentation, as foreign audiences may interpret these festivals without a full understanding of their cultural context. Another substantial problem implies the drastic decline of participation among younger generations and the impact of globalization necessitating innovative strategies to ensure the sustainability of these festivals.

It follows, then, that all these challenges and many others not mentioned here present excellent research opportunities for data scientists to work across Japanese settings. Any effort to address these issues would proactively ensure the continued authenticity, dynamics, and relevance of these local traditional cultural festivals as representable visualizations of intangible heritage. However, this is not the scope of this study. Perhaps one way to address the issue of youth is through motivation with potent means that help them to become more interested in the overall festival atmosphere and hence promote active citizenship open to the world. In a similar way, EACEA’s (2008) appeal is telling: Efforts must be made to engage younger generations as actors and create a sense of ownership and pride in their common cultural heritage. Such a commitment would allow them to express their creative energy and contribute to their personal development and their feeling of belonging to a community. Despite this, however, it is very good to know that the vast majority of residents interviewed continued to perform the same kind of ritualized festivals and to think about them in the same way prior to the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Taken together and following Boyer (2001: 35–236)’s viewpoints, I can posit that all the five case studies of ritualized festivals discussed here display at least three important properties that cultural anthropologists have identified in many rituals. First, participants and onlookers feel quite something clearly, though this feeling is particularly difficult to describe in detail. This is precisely because the conception of what they are doing and its supposed effect, is not terribly obvious. Even though one may witness a lot of acting, it is not quite like theatre, as the consequences of the performance are all too real. One matter is certain in this context: what makes these ritualized festivals, like any ritual, special is that they combine “these elements of work and play with a sense of urgency, that is, an intuition that [participants and onlookers should] perform them in the correct way otherwise something terrible may happen. [However,] there is often no explanation of how correct performance averts that danger (or indeed what the danger actually is)” (Boyer 2001: 235). Second, the above-outlined collective events have consequences for social interaction, while simultaneously displaying the *social energy* (Greenblatt 1989) of participants and onlookers. Greenblatt used the concept (and label) of “social energy” to specifically denote the collective emotional and psychological force generated by a community’s shared beliefs and cultural practices. It drives social and cultural transformations, shaping historical events and influencing individuals’ behaviors within a

society, impacting power dynamics, and defining cultural moments. Third, and more importantly, “notions of supernatural agents are included in many rituals [that characterize the ritualized festivals under consideration.] This *supernatural participation* problem is better understood if we realize that the participation in question is really optional, as witness the number of rituals without any gods or spirits. [Yet, readers should further infer that the above-outlined five case studies of salient cultural preservation activities display] belief in gods and spirits, [and even though they do not require ritual, participants hold them for other reasons, as these supernatural agents are readily] much more convincing once they are somehow included in these salient activities” (Boyer 2001: 236, italics in the original).

The following, at least, is what would be the natural conclusion drawn from the above discussion. All the above-mentioned three properties provide us with clues and reasons to understand why the five selected salient cultural preservation activities, like many others of this genre, are relevant to participants and onlookers’ minds. Even though not all have these properties, Boyer (2001: 235) reminds us that those that do are “optimally and successfully transmitted” in some specific settings. However, whether there is, for participants, escape from or transcendence over the aforementioned three properties remains an abiding question in the social research community. At any rate, empirical evidence appears to suggest that such cultural creations are contextually successful merely because “they activate a variety of mental capacities, most of which have other, very precise functions” (Boyer 2001: 235). A final point is plain: through the organization and celebration of these ritualized festivals, one observes that the very “image of a cultural center is created by local cultural policy and local government” (Jamieson 2014, reviewed by Jansa 2017: 202). From the lens of the interplay dynamic between cultural negotiation and identity, this situation translates the reality of a glocal network that definitively leads to what Jamieson coined as a “Creative City” (which is highly regarded here as an internationalist institution) and its administrative imaginaries that legitimize both the global and local dimensions of the cultural identity of a place and its inhabitants (Jamieson 2014: 293).⁶ Still, much research is needed in this area to discuss, as Wilson et al. (2017) suggested, the development of festivals over time and the wider networks in which festivals are embedded. It is equally desirable that social researchers closely study festivals by singling out their core features of material culture and technology, the organization of micro-economies, and the relations between culture and environment.

Conclusion

This study has extended ethnographic insights into the distinctive aspects of five integrated cultural performance festivals that thrive in specific Japanese settings. The synthesis yielded

⁶ It should be remembered in passing that “Jamieson’s term of institutionalist administrative imaginaries refers [here specifically] to artificially, intellectually, and administratively created concepts of cultural destination, which are part of economic and political decisions” (Jansa 2017: 202).

three important results that may apply with consideration of all other relevant variables: first, these ritualized festivals ultimately represent dynamic and multifaceted events that play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage, fostering community engagement, and promoting artistic expression. Secondly, my review of the ritual life of the concerned individual communities has certainly shown the measurable impact of these festivals on cultural preservation, social cohesion, economic growth, and artistic innovation, while global perceptions of Japanese culture also make them intriguing subjects of study. Finally, it should be plain that nearly all the ritualized festivals I observed and participated in ultimately serve as dynamic showcases of cultural diversity, uniting individuals from different backgrounds, and promoting cultural appreciation. Part I of this research clearly underscored this perspective: all cultural performance festivals studied firmly point to possibilities of generating, collectively, time and spaces of cultural belonging, association, and solidarity. Conversely, the present study adds that challenges such as modernization, globalization, and changing demographics require ongoing efforts to ensure the continuity and vitality of these collective events. In general, therefore, I would concede to Addo (2009: 231) who also argues that “the myriad, true meanings and histories of festival are accessible mainly by repeatedly participating in them, while maintaining a sense of their transformative potential for oneself.” In this connection, it further became clear in all urban neo-traditional festival settings observed that people’s administrative imaginaries also significantly influence urban identity, since the striking institutionalist administrative imaginary of the urban festival itself here “validated and culturalized an affective urban identity that continues to permeate [the] discursive network of city planning” (Jamieson 2014: 294). That is perhaps why one might best understand local traditional cultural festivals, by recognizing them as rituals while consuming them as spectacles that enrich societies, foster inclusivity, and nurture a shared sense of humanity.

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