

DANCING WITH THE GODS

OBSERVATIONS OF THE NIINO SNOW FESTIVAL

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The Niino Snow Festival is a three-day event that attracts visitors by combining traditional arts and prayer rituals for worldly benefits at a secluded local mountain shrine. Weathering the cold, fatigue, and the smoke of burning wood, participants engage in night-long dances with local gods in expectation of a bountiful harvest. The 2019 Nanzan Seminar comprised an excursion for attendants to witness the festival's aesthetically pleasing yet ultimately challenging environmental setting and performances. It is within this context that we observed and learned how decreasing participation in the course of rural depopulation has changed the festival over time, raising questions as to how long it will survive in its current form.

EVERY YEAR during the final days of the extended New Year celebration (13–15 January), the valley of Niino 新野 in southern Nagano Prefecture attracts visitors to the Niino Snow Festival (*Niino no yuki matsuri* 新野の雪祭り). The three-day festival is said to usher in the new year and petition the gods for a bountiful spring. Organized and performed by members of the Niino community, the festival begins on the 13th at Suwa Jinja 諏訪神社 located to the north, before it reaches its zenith on the morning of January 15th at Izu Jinja 伊豆神社 in the south. Nestled amidst the majestic stretch of forest connecting the central mountain range of Nagano and Shizuoka Prefectures to the southern Japanese Alps of Aichi Prefecture, this seasonal event is a rare glimpse into the rites and costumes of local mountain shrines.

Attending the Niino Snow Festival provided for with a welcome opportunity to explore combinatory practices of *kami* and Buddhas (*shinbutsu shūgō* 神仏習合) in contemporary Japan. The theoretical challenges posed by shifts in how the relationship between buddhas and *kami* have been variously interpreted over time and in diverse religious contexts formed a recurring theme in this year's Nanzan Seminar discussion. New approaches to the study of combinatory practices guided the papers presented by Emanuela Sala and Jesse Drian on

medieval Buddhism in particular, but *shinbutsu shūgō* was also a topic that came up during Franziska Steffen's talk on Tenrikyō in the Meiji era. Our excursion was, thus, not only a recreational experience and bonding event; it was relevant to and interactive with the general theme of the Seminar. Presenters were able to witness the interplay of diverse religious beliefs and practices within a local and social context on site. We are grateful to Abe Yasuro and Chikamoto Kensuke of Nagoya University for leading the Seminar presenters and participants on this excursion following the closing of the fourth Nanzan Seminar.

The bus trip to Izu Jinja took approximately two hours along a series of mountain roads. The shrine itself is inaccessible by car, requiring visitors to climb a sequence of stairways before reaching the main buildings, where the main events took place all night long. With temperatures hovering just below freezing, we wrapped in our warmest garments, packed some snacks to tide us over through the evening, and began the ascent up the mountainside.



The snow-covered stairways to Izu Jinja

When we arrived around 9 pm, preparations were still being made for the events scheduled to start after midnight and carry on well past sunrise. Musicians had already been warming up and began a series of traditional melodies as a part of the *kagura* 神楽 ensemble, while a group of firefighters assembled wood for a bonfire in the courtyard opening to the main hall. A tent selling *udon* noodles and warm sake (*atsukan* 熱燗) seemed to be the center of

the pre-festival activities, and, so that is where we gathered to await the main celebrations.



The *kagura* 神楽 ensemble



Seminar participants gathering at the bonfire

While awaiting the main events, we collected bits and pieces of information about the festival's history from locals and our guides from Nagoya University.



Izu Jinja

The festival allegedly has a 750 year tradition that dates back to a combination of rites venerating the local deity Izu Gongen 伊豆権現, a classical style of dance called Takigi Nō 薪能, and shrine performances associated with Kasuga Taisha 春日大社 in Nara. These combinatory practices were influenced by the performances and rituals of diverse major cultic sites, including Kasuga Taisha and Ise Jingū 伊勢神宮, among others (YAMADA 2019, 1).

Why this location was chosen for the festival is not exactly clear. Niino has an altitude of approximately eight hundred meters, and sits at the intersection of Akiha Jinja Hongū 秋葉神社本宮 to the East, Atsuta Jinja 熱田神社 to the West, Ise Jingū 伊勢神宮 to the South, and Zenkōji 善光寺 to the North. Perhaps its equidistant location from these major cultic sites made the Niino valley the ideal spot for such an event, as also one of the local participants in the festival explained. Traces of *ryokan* lodges in the valley and its proximity to the old Enshū Kaidō 遠州街道 route (now National Highway 151) suggest that the area may have been a popular stopover for travelers, which may have contributed to the popularity of the festival. Whatever the case might be, the Niino Suwa and Izu Jinja have hosted the festival longer than anyone can remember.

The modern form of the festival was popularized by folklorist Origuchi Shinobu 折口信夫 (1887–1953), who, along with fellow local historian Hayakawa Kōtarō 早川孝太郎 (1889–1956) dubbed the event the “Niino Snow Festival” in 1925. Before this, it was known by various titles such as Dengaku Matsuri 田楽祭り and Nizenji Kannon no Omatsuri 二善寺観音のお祭. The name “Snow Festival”

was based on a legend associated with New Year's festivals, which claimed that if snow falls during the day of the celebration there will be a bountiful harvest that year. The snow is also symbolic; the white snowflakes were thought to resemble grains of rice falling from sky. Therefore, the heavier the snowfall, the greater the coming year's rice harvest would be (YAMADA 2019, 2-3).

As midnight approached, some twenty firefighters assembled to check their safety equipment and prepare to lift the torch. Approximately one meter in diameter and seven meters tall, the torch consists of a large cedar tree that had been split in half and stuffed with pine branches and kindling. Using poles and pulleys, the firefighters slowly lifted the torch upright and secured it within a preconstructed scaffolding. A wooden boat fastened to a set of pulleys was then lit on fire and slowly drawn to the top of torch. Once lit, it was time to begin the main festivities.



Firefighters lifting the torch



Incantations performed by shrine priests at Izu Jinja



Ritual dances in front of the shrine's main building

It is within this context that the Niino Snow Festival presents perspectives on the communal effort characteristic of Japanese temple and shrine festival culture. The festival wouldn't be possible without the workforce of volunteers.

Yet while twice as many men are said to have helped raise the massive torch in the past, nowadays only around twenty firefighters remain. Yamada Takehiro, a long-time observer of the Niino Snow Festival, who has attended the ceremonies at Izu Jinja more than ten times, confirmed that the number of active participants has been decreasing year by year (YAMADA 2019, 77). As a result, the torch has gradually become smaller, making it easier to erect with fewer participants. The festival's safety standards have also changed over time. In the past, those who raised the massive tree stems could only rely on their own strength and the gods for protection under the moon light, as wires were absent at that time. Nowadays, by contrast, thick wire is used to hold the large torch in place, which decreases the risk for those involved in raising the pole. Judging by the nonchalant remarks of some of the locals, however, it also partly diminished the thrill and excitement for one of the festival's peak moments.

It would be easy to dismiss declining participation in the festival as proof of a presumed decline in faith, or as the result of lacking interest in traditional temple and shrine festivals among younger Japanese. However, it is important to consider recent social changes facing rural communities. Declining birth rates and the aging of local Japanese communities are two important factors that put the continuation of many shrine and temple festivals at risk (see for example SAKURAI and KAWAMATA 2016).



Devilish mountain ghosts (*tengu* 天狗) entering the stage

What attracts visitors to the Niino Snow Festival is not only its history or legendary origin, nor are the buddhas and *kami* worshipped and expelled as parts of the rituals necessarily known by those who attend these rituals. Much of the festival's attraction is aesthetic. The festival's visual power, for example, can hardly be overstated, as different types of colored masks mark the participants' transformation from human actors into gods, mountain ghosts, and devils. Twenty-three different masks are used in the Niino Snow Festival, each embodying the presence of the gods during the ritual dances. YAMADA Takehiro (2019, 1, 13, 15) describes an infamous incident in which a photographer requested that one of the dances be repeated in order to capture a better photo. The request drew criticism from angry festival attendants, who claimed that this was not just a dance. The special horse (called *kyōman* 競馬 in Japanese) performing the dance was considered to be a powerful *kami*, and it was improper, even sacrilege, to make such a demand of an invited deity.



Hachiman 八幡 taming a horse (*koma* 駒) to ride on it

Designated an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property 国指定重要無形民俗文化財 since 1977, the Niino Snow Festival has been widely acknowledged as a rare occasion to observe a confluence of traditional arts and religious rites performed at a local mountain shrine by the local community. In retrospect, despite being cold and exhausted, the opportunity to see the traditional dances and rites set to the tune of a *kagura* ensemble was worth the sacrifice of comfort. In fact, such austerities seem to be one of the appeals of the event. As YAMADA

(2019, 14, 169) emphasizes in his account of the night-long event, the “three *mui*” of being sleepy (*nemui* 眠い), plagued with smoke (*kemui* 煙い), and cold (*samui* 寒い) are what gives the festival its distinct atmosphere. Nonetheless, we recommend that prospective festival-goers bring plenty of warm attire and, perhaps, take a nap before the events begin.

References

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