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Faith as Authenticity

Kyoto's Gion Festival in 2020

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the cancellation of public events throughout Japan. Kyoto's Gion Festival was no exception. In an attempt to preserve what they regarded as the festival's "true meaning," different groups of actors involved in the Gion Festival came up with alternative ways of bringing the gods to the city. In this article, I trace the tensions that surfaced during the process of composing an alternative festival format. I also analyze media narratives that ex post presented the modified 2020 Gion Festival as a sincere expression of faith and prayer and as uniquely authentic to its "true meaning." The alternative festival offers a striking example of ways that authenticity can be successfully constructed and projected in a time of crisis that challenges or otherwise alters the continuity of established practices and traditions.

KEYWORDS: Kyoto—Gion Festival—COVID-19—authenticity—faith—separation of state and religion—tourism—heritage

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On 20 April 2020, around three months before the Gion Festival was due to be staged in July, a press conference was held at Yasaka 八坂 Shrine in Kyoto to decide on the festival's fate within the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic.[1] Addressing the assembled press, Yasaka Shrine's head priest, Mori Hisao 森 壽雄, and the chairman of the Floats Association, Kimura Ikujirō 木村幾次郎, announced that the festival would not be held as normal. Wearing white priestly robes and a facemask, Mori explained that the procession of the portable shrine (*mikoshi* 神輿) would have to be canceled. Instead, abridged substitute rites would be performed within the grounds of Yasaka Shrine. Kimura, in a formal suit and wearing an identical facemask, added that the two float parades also had to be called off. The decision as to whether the floats would at least be assembled in the streets (*hokotate* 鉾建て) for a static "sitting festival" (*imatsuri* 居祭) was postponed to early June. Under normal circumstances, up to a million visitors mill around the floats during the *yoiyama* 宵山 (evenings of the days that proceed the parades). Enjoying the general bustle and the slight cooling of the air after sundown, people stroll the streets where the floats stand ready in preparation for the parades. Kimura left little hope, however, that any of this could go ahead as planned, even if the floats were to be positioned in the streets. Any events staged in the streets would have to end by the late afternoon.

The COVID-19 crisis inspired a range of actors from various corners of the festival community to design, arrange, and perform an alternative Gion Festival instead. This article traces the process that led to the altered festival as a remarkable outcome, considering that most festivals in the country were simply called off. In particular, I argue that the 2020 Gion Festival can be read as a study into the inscrutable and contradictory negotiation of authenticity and authentication. This was an almost entirely "new" festival; nearly all of its verifiably "old" elements were perforce omitted. Yet, both the actors and the media construed the 2020 Gion Festival as uniquely faithful to its *hongi* 本義 ("true meaning"), even more so than the studiously traditional versions of the festival performed in previous years before the pandemic.

National broadcaster NHK followed the creation of the 2020 Gion Festival from the very start. The presence of NHK cameras suggests the existence of a

1. "Gion matsuri no yamahoko junkō chūshi o happyō: 'Kujū no ketsudan datta'" 祇園祭の山鉾巡行中止を発表—「苦渋の決断だった」, *Kyōto shinbun* 京都新聞, 20 April 2020.

premeditated media strategy on the part of the festival's actors by mid-May. An NHK documentary, broadcast in various formats on both local and national channels, stressed that this was a performance rooted in deep-felt faith and prayer, which marked an implicit contrast to the luxurious extravagance (*gōka kenran* 豪華絢爛) normally pointed out in descriptions of the Gion parades.[2] This emphasis on faith raises questions about making space for religious events in the public sphere in contemporary Japan (PORCU 2012; 2020; TEEUWEN 2020a). The Gion Festival balances on the constitutional divide between "secular" culture and "religion." The floats parades have enjoyed a long career as cultural heritage, from their designation as an Intangible Cultural Property in 1952 to their listing as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009, and enjoy public subsidies from Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture, and the national Agency for Cultural Affairs (Bunkachō 文化庁). The *mikoshi* processions, on the other hand, are defined as a religious event and are treated with greater caution both by policymakers and the media. Here I argue that the media narrative about the 2020 Gion Festival offers a striking example of recent discourse on "faith" as a unifying cultural tradition that, contrary to potentially divisive "religion" and "inauthentic" commercialization, belongs in the public sphere and is worthy of preservation.

The Gion Festival and the Pandemic

The Gion Festival was, of course, only one of many events affected by the 2020 pandemic. Schools throughout the country were closed by 2 March, and quarantine restrictions were put in place for travelers later that month. On 24 March, Prime Minister Abe announced that the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, originally scheduled to start in late July, were to be postponed by one year. After this watershed moment, measures to reduce infection escalated rapidly. On 7 April Abe proclaimed a "state of emergency" (the first since World War II) for Tokyo and six other prefectures.

This state of emergency was extended to the whole of Japan on 16 April, including Kyoto, which triggered the aforementioned press conference at

2. NHK Sōgō (Kyoto), *Kami to inori no ame no natsu: Gion matsuri 1151 nen* 神と祈りの雨の夏—祇園祭1151年 (A rainy summer of gods and prayers: The Gion Festival in its 1151th year), broadcast 15 August 2020, 6:05–6:45 PM. The program description read: "'This is the time Kyoto needs a festival.' The Gion Festival's float parades and *mikoshi* processions have been canceled. A single letter, written by a sushi chef born and bred under the steps that lead up to Yasaka Shrine, changed the festival's history. Intimate prayers from a Kyoto without tourists: The tale of a summer festival that united Kyoto in prayer." The same program, but shortened to thirty minutes, was broadcast on national television on 12 October. An even shorter version, broadcast locally on 24 September, carried the title *Inori no genten ni: Koronaka no Gion matsuri* 祈りの原点に—コロナ禍の祇園祭 (Returning to its starting point of prayer: The Gion Festival in the time of corona).

Yasaka Shrine on 20 April. In the same week (if not earlier), festivals were being canceled around the country, as were all other events that were expected to attract crowds. Kyoto had already changed beyond recognition. The city has experienced explosive growth in tourist numbers over the last decade, spurring fears of a much trumpeted "overtourism." But now, an even more devastating "undertourism" suddenly left many of the entrepreneurs who had invested in the city's tourist boom stranded.[3] The number of foreign visitors to Japan in July of 2019 was just short of three million; in July 2020, it fell by 99.9% to 3,800.[4] With people being urged to stay at home, domestic tourism also plummeted. Almost all businesses in front of Yasaka Shrine were closed. The eastern end of Shijō Street transformed from a lively area of traditional shops and eateries into a shuttered desert.

The Gion Festival has been intertwined with tourism for a very long time. Kyoto City began to subsidize the festival as early as 1923, with an eye on its economic effects both in the city itself and in the surrounding districts. After World War II, Kyoto City's Tourism Division and the Kyoto Tourism Alliance (a semi-private organization initiated by Kyoto City) played a decisive role in the fundraising effort necessary to put the festival back on track. This revival was completed in 1952. Under Mayor Takayama Gizō 高山義三 (in office 1950–1966), the city's involvement in the float parades intensified further. In order to make the parades more attractive to tourists, Takayama rerouted them in 1956. Ten years later, he combined the two float parades held on 17 and 24 July into one held on the seventeenth (Itō 2010).[5] The preservation associations that run the festival floats continue to depend on subsidies, which in 2015 made up between 8 to 44 percent of their budget (Satō 2019, figures 6.1 and 6.2). These subsidies combine the goals of heritage preservation with tourism as one of the mainstays of Kyoto's economy.

In 2020, however, no tourists were to be expected. In effect, this increased the pressure on the festival's stakeholders to find some alternative way to stage the festival. In the wake of Takayama's reforms, many had felt that the festival was losing its soul and degenerating into a "show" for tourists. In July 1963, for example, *Kyōto shinbun* contrasted different views on the festival's present state under headings like "Tourism or faith?" and "Between show and faith" (Teeuwen 2020a, 145).[6] The question of whether the festival would manage to retain

3. "Outbreak turns Kyoto's 'overtourism' into 'undertourism'," *Japan Times*, 14 March 2020.

4. These numbers are from JTB Tourist Research & Consulting (www.tourism.jp/en/tourism-database/stats).

5. Teeuwen (2020a) gives an account of public involvement in the festival from 1912 until 2018, while Teeuwen (2020b) focuses on the wartime and the Occupation period.

6. "Kankō ka shinkō ka" 観光か信仰か and "Shō to shinkō no aida" ショーと信仰の間, *Kyōto shinbun*, 16 July 1963.

its authentic essence, defined as an expression of faith, was hotly disputed in these years. This question also emerged in resistance to Takayama's push to abolish the second parade.

The second parade was finally restored in 2014, causing the authenticity debate to lose some of its momentum. As we shall see, however, it is not forgotten. In practice, "tourism or faith" was of course never an either/or question. The structural problem was how to accommodate tourism without prejudicing faith, or, depending on one's perspective, how to accommodate faith without prejudicing tourism. The question of how tourism and faith might be balanced has been a constant point of contention between different actors involved in the Gion Festival. In this context, "tourism" and "show" serve as shorthand for inauthentic commercialism, while "faith" refers less to religion than to the core of authenticity that continues to give the festival value beyond mere entertainment and moneymaking. If in 2020 the disappearance of tourism was demonstrated to render the festival pointless, it would be difficult to uphold the notion that at its core the Gion Festival was still an authentic expression of faith. Such an outcome would strike some as a loss of meaning from which the festival might never recover and as a painful defeat indeed.

The economic impact of the cancellation was expected to be considerable. One estimate, cited on the NHK website on 2 June, predicted the economic loss for Kyoto Prefecture to amount to 18.67 billion yen, caused by the cancellation of the Gion parade alone.[7] However, this bill was more of a concern for entrepreneurs in the city than for the festival's caretakers, notably the shrine priests, the organizers of the floats, the members of the shrine's *ujiko* 氏子 (parish) association, and the groups of *mikoshi* bearers. In normal years, most of these actors are happy to break even. In the case of a positive balance, the proceeds are ploughed back into the festival in the form of repairs, further embellishments, or investments into outreach addressing the general public and potential sponsors. As one float leader told *Kyōto shinbun*, "We have survived thanks to our volunteers. To try and make money off a festival is wrong to begin with."[8] In fact, most actors would likely have incurred considerable losses in 2020 due to heavy rain. In the

7. This number was cited by NHK (2 June 2020), based on calculations by the Kansai University economist Miyamoto Katsuhiro (www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20200602/k10012454401000.html, accessed 23 July 2020). The estimate was based on the assumption that the 2020 Gion Festival would have drawn nine hundred thousand visitors (the average for the three previous years), and included their spending on accommodation, food, and products (souvenirs) manufactured within Kyoto Prefecture.

8. Tanabe Katsuji 田邊克爾, chairman of the Preservation Association of Aburatenjinyama. Published in "'Sakibure' o ushinatta mikoshi" 「先触れ」を失った神輿, *Kyōto shinbun*, 14 July 2014, and included in a special series on the Gion Festival in the summer of 2020 under the telling heading "Hongi."

festival month of July, Kyoto suffered more than twice the normal amount of rain, causing flooding and mudslides. Talking to people involved in the floats, I encountered no one who regretted missed earnings, while some allowed themselves to express some relief over avoided losses.

More than money, the caretakers talked about a sense of responsibility. In the press conference on 20 April, head priest Mori stressed that the decision to cancel was taken with "an acute sense of regret" (*danchō no omoi* 断腸の思い). This regret arose from a deeply felt obligation to keep the festival going even in adverse circumstances. The *mikoshi* processions had been canceled in the worst years of the war (1944–1946), but never since. The float parades, too, have faced up to adversity multiple times since their postwar revival, most recently Typhoon Nangka in 2015. The city authorities have increasingly come to share the notion that the parades must be allowed to go ahead under all but the most adverse circumstances. In 1962, the extension of the Hankyū railway line to Kawaramachi forced the floats to remain stationary; it was argued that it would be too dangerous to pull the floats, which weigh up to twelve tons, across the metal plates that temporarily covered the construction site. By 1990, however, such a measure had become unthinkable. In that year, part of the route was dug up for the construction of the Tōzai metro line; but in order to allow the parades to shine, dug-up sections were filled in, and heavy machinery was moved away from the view of media photographers and cameramen. Clearly, the caretakers of the festival shouldered the expectations of the city and had a responsibility to deliver. In 2019, the festival celebrated its 1150th anniversary. Many among the festival's caretakers felt that a simple cancellation in 2020 offended the sense of pride and honor that came with that responsibility.

The cause of the cancellation, moreover, added insult to injury. It is both an historical fact and a prominent part of contemporary narratives about the Gion Festival that the "aim" of the festival proceedings is to dispel illness from the city. Pamphlets, guidebooks, and websites uniformly identify a court rite performed in 869 as the mythological origin of the festival. In that year a great epidemic ravaged the country, and the emperor issued an edict ordering the performance of a *goryōe* 御霊会 (a Buddhist rite to placate the wrathful spirits believed to have unleashed the pestilence) in a palace garden called the Shinsen'en 神泉苑. Allegedly, this ritual began with the raising of sixty-six halberds symbolizing Japan's provinces. Monks recited sutras, while different groups of dancers put on performances to placate the angry spirits. The garden's gates were opened to the public, who flooded in and gave the *goryōe* the character of a festive occasion. Historians date the actual origin of the Gion Festival a century or so later, but the Shinsen'en legend has retained its grip on the festival's religious and popular signification. Now, for the first time in the postwar era, Kyoto was actually facing an

epidemic. Never before has the festival been canceled because of an epidemic.[9] Calling off the procession and the parade under such circumstances felt almost like a betrayal.

For all these reasons, there was considerable pressure on the festival's actors to find alternative means of getting the festival going, and they proceeded to do exactly that. The 2020 Gion Festival offered testimony to the determination of many different groups of caretakers, while casting a revealing light on the social dynamics between them. The festival's social structure has the form of a network, rather than a pyramid. In other words, there is no central leadership. Communication is limited; the decision-making process is decentralized. Within a short span of time, festival actors were forced to rethink their practices, seek a consensus, make new choices under daunting circumstances, and respond to the choices taken by others. In normal years, these actors follow a script that ensures continuity and prevents conflicts of interest. In 2020, the script had to be abandoned, and tensions and ruptures within the social fabric of the festival became visible with particular clarity, offering a unique window on the festival's networks and functioning.

It was in this process of negotiation that the word *hongi* emerged as the guiding phrase of the alternative Gion Festival of 2020. While all agreed that without tourists, the festival was as meaningful or even more meaningful than usual, it soon turned out that different actors had disparate understandings as to what its *hongi* might be, and how this "true meaning" should be enacted in practice. Such tensions were glossed over in the final narrative as composed and presented by the NHK and other media after the festival was over. It is those tensions and the process of their resolution that interest me in this article.

Since travel restrictions due to COVID-19 have made it impossible for tourists and visitors to enter Japan, this work is the result of an experiment in what Günel, Varma, and Watanabe have recently termed "patchwork ethnography," a form of ethnography that arises in a setting where "traditional" long-term immersion in the field is no longer possible for various reasons. Such reasons, they argue, include all the personal and professional obligations that rest on any researcher. They point out that "ethnographers have been adapting to various fieldwork challenges through methods such as online research, multi-sited fieldwork, auto-ethnography, and by attending to research subjects who are mobile, familiar, or themselves experts" and argue that these innovations remain "black-boxed": looked upon as shortcuts, rather than a potential source of reflection and innovation (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020). In my case, the patchwork includes a six-month period of fieldwork and archival work for this project in 2018. At the time, I interviewed a number of people who later emerged as

9. In 1879, cholera forced a postponement until November.

important actors in 2020. In 2020, I was reduced to following events by means of long-distance interviews and discussions with informants I came to know in 2018 combined with online media reports glimpsed from my office in Oslo.[10]

The result is certainly laced with holes and unsightly seams. However, I argue that a partial view on what went on in Kyoto in the spring and summer of 2020, mainly through public sources, is representative of what was visible to the general public in Japan with an interest in the Gion Festival. Based on these sources, this article aims to outline the process through which a meaningful alternative to the traditional Gion Festival was conceived, realized, and communicated to the wider community in Kyoto and beyond. In so doing, I pay special attention to notions of meaning and authenticity that have been publicly expressed by some of the actors involved, as well as broadcast to the public in the media.

The Festival and its Actors

It is characteristic of public events, including festivals, that they are "moved forward by networks of agency" rather than centrally controlled by a single group of organizers (Hüsken and Michaels 2013, 12). Even under normal circumstances, festivals combine strictly choreographed rituals with spontaneous occurrences that surprise, delight, or offend those who happen to be present. There is a sliding scale from a central, untouchable "sacred" core to peripheral events and themes that come and go. Understandings of what is untouchable and what is fringe, however, are not always clear and depend on one's perspective.

Kyoto's Gion Festival is perhaps even more decentralized than most festivals.[11] The defining events of its month-long proceedings take place on 17 and 24 July. Under normal circumstances, elaborate floats supported by "streets" (*chō* 町) are pulled or carried along a set route through the city center on these days. The floats are run by preservation associations (*hozonkai* 保存会) organized as so-called Public Interest Incorporated Foundations, which involve local street residents as well as different types of insiders from elsewhere. The first parade of floats consists of twenty-three floats from the southern half of the city blocks defined as the *ujiko* area of Yasaka Shrine. The second parade, from streets further north, is more modest and smaller in scale. It counts eleven floats, with one more float currently being in the process of revival. The float streets cover only a

10. In particular, I talked to Imanishi Tomoo 今西知夫 (then of the Miyamoto gumi 宮本組) and Yoshikawa Tadao 吉川忠男 of Sanwaka 三若. I did fieldwork as a volunteer during *yoiyama* at Ōfuneyama but did not become acquainted with Kimura Nobusuke 木村宣介 at that time. I owe a particularly great debt to Tanaka Sachimi 田中幸美 of the Kyoto office of the *Sankei shinbun* 産経新聞, Satō Hirotaka 佐藤弘隆 of Funehoko Street and Ritsumeikan University, and the Kyoto photographer and *matsuri* expert Miyake Tōru 三宅 徹, whose photos accompany this article.

11. For a detailed description of the festival, see Porcu (2020).

limited section of the *ujiko* area. If they participate at all, most *ujiko* members are merely involved in the form of monetary donations or the acquisition of *chimaki* 粽 amulets. Other *ujiko*, as we shall see, have special functions within the festival. Actors from outside the *ujiko* area also perform important roles, including the carrying of the gods in *mikoshi*.

The parades are solemn affairs. They take place in the morning between around 9 AM to 11:30 AM along broad avenues lined with some two hundred thousand spectators (or about half that number for the second parade), including a few thousand in reserved seating areas. The pace is slow, and the atmosphere dignified and free of obvious ludic elements. The larger floats incorporate platforms for musicians who perform rhythmic pieces (*hayashi* 囃子) particular to each float. The highlights are the two turns on the route, in which the floats must be carefully navigated with the help of long ropes, wet strips of bamboo, and much ritualized gesturing and shouting.

In the evenings on those same dates, the gods of Yasaka Shrine are moved from the shrine to a site in the city center (on 17 July) and back (on 24 July). Yasaka Shrine is located on the eastern side of the Kamo River, outside of the city's traditional borders. For the duration of the festival, the gods are installed in a location called the *otabisho* 御旅所 (travel site) west of the Kamo River. The gods are moved with the help of three elaborate *mikoshi*, each supported by its own association of bearers (*shin'yokai* 神輿会). The *mikoshi* weigh well over two tons each. They are hitched up on two long poles with room for about fifty bearers; but the route is long, and so bearers take turns. Each association has hundreds of members, who mill around the *mikoshi* in white traditional clothing. The yells of the *mikoshi* bearers appear to express the power of the gods they carry.

The *mikoshi* processions are headed by members of yet another association, which eventually came to play a central role in the events of 2020: the Miyamoto gumi or "association of the *ujiko* who live nearest to Yasaka Shrine." Led by the owners of shops along Shijō Street east of the Kamo River, this association represents the school district of Yasaka. This area has no floats, nor is it associated with any of the *mikoshi* associations. It prides itself on its special intimacy with the shrine and performs prominent roles in several Gion rituals, particularly those related to the *mikoshi*. During the procession, Miyamoto gumi members walk in front of the *mikoshi* carrying "divine treasures." Foremost among these is a lacquered board inscribed with an imperial edict issued in 974 announcing the donation of the first *otabisho* not far from the present site and giving orders to move the Gion gods to this *otabisho* every year. Other treasures include weapons (halberds, crested shields, swords, bows and arrows) and a *koto* 琴 zither. A *gagaku* 雅楽 ensemble, playing solemn court music, leads the Miyamoto gumi group and gives the procession an air of solemn sacrality.

The *mikoshi* travel convoluted routes. On the evening of 17 July between 6 PM to 6:30 PM, they leave the shrine precincts one by one and arrive at the *otabisho* between 8 PM and 9 PM. Their return to the shrine on 24 July is an even more elaborate event, lasting from 5 PM until midnight. In contrast to the parades (and to the Miyamoto gumi), the *mikoshi* processions are rowdy affairs with a decidedly macho atmosphere. There is much shouting and banter. At significant places along the route, the *mikoshi* are thrust up in the air and moved up and down in an impressive display of power and energy. Alcohol is now banned, but at least until the 1970s drunkenness used to be a prominent feature of these processions, as were fights. Although the bearers are now strikingly disciplined, there is still an obvious contrast in body language between the members of the *mikoshi* associations and those of the Miyamoto gumi and the floats, reflecting the time-honored structures of Kyoto's class hierarchy.

The many other components of the Gion Festival all relate to the parades and processions on 17 and 24 July in some way. The floats are (partially) assembled two or three days before the parades. In the evenings on these days, the streets are filled with crowds of people, many in *yukata*, who spend the evening strolling from one float to another, listening to the rhythmic music, buying amulets and souvenirs, and enjoying some of the snacks and drinks on offer at stalls. They can also buy tickets to enter one or two of the streets' "assembly houses" (*kaisho* 会所), offer some coins and prayers to the street god, admire the street treasures, and board the floats themselves to look down on the crowds, although some floats admit only males. These *yoiyama* evenings are the most popular part of the festival. Most people cannot take time off work to view the float parades, and the *mikoshi* processions are not exceptional enough to attract large crowds. An informal evening stroll through the *yoiyama* bustle, when something is always happening at one or another of the floats or just in the streets around them, is a pleasure many look forward to as a summer highlight.

Additional rituals can be divided into float rituals, *mikoshi* rituals, and others. Examples of float rituals are the drawing of lots at Kyoto City Hall to determine the order of the parade, shrine visits by float representatives and (for a few floats) "god children" (*chigo* 稚児), and a wide range of other float-specific events. *Mikoshi*-related rituals include the cleansing of the *mikoshi* before and after the transfer of the gods, and the procedures for moving the spirits of the gods from the shrine's main hall into the *mikoshi* and back. The Miyamoto gumi plays a prominent role in many of these rites. Finally, other events are staged by groups that have a special relationship with the shrine and festival. Among these are the organizers of a lantern parade on 10 July, an historical parade of "flower-topped parasols" (*hanagasa* 花笠) on 24 July, a long list of traditional performances at Yasaka Shrine, and a display of old harnesses in Yumiya Street, whose inhabitants

headed the *mikoshi* processions in the Edo period. In addition, the Gion Festival crowds attract stallholders and vendors, street performers, and many others.

In 2020, most of these groups and associations were simply inactive. Only a few were involved in the process that led to the arrangement of the year's alternative performance. This "inner core" consisted of three main groups: the Miyamoto gumi, the Floats Association, and the *mikoshi* associations. Yasaka Shrine also played a role but kept a strikingly low profile. To set the scene for their interaction in 2020, I will now give a brief outline of these three groups, their composition, their functions, and their understandings of their own roles in the festival.

THE MIYAMOTO GUMI

The Miyamoto gumi consists of about seventy men representing the *ujiko* of the neighborhood nearest to the shrine. This area constituted shrine land of the old Gionsha 祇園社 (the pre-Meiji name of Yasaka Shrine), and during most of the shrine's history served as its main source of income. The Miyamoto gumi, earlier known as Miyamoto *kōsha* 講社, is one of twenty-five *ujiko* associations, each covering one school district within the *ujiko* area. These twenty-five school districts have historical roots in pre-Meiji streets associations (*chōgumi* 町組). These associations first emerged as the lowest level of town administration in the chaotic 1530s, and in the Edo and early Meiji periods they had a considerable degree of autonomy in local affairs. They were therefore tasked with the running of primary schools when these were first introduced in 1869. Today's school districts continue to function as nodes of social integration because people identify with their old school, stay in contact with old classmates, or meet as parents of pupils. The twenty-five *ujiko* associations, all called *kōsha*, are organized as branches of Seisei Kōsha 清々講社 (Purity Association), Yasaka's *ujiko* union. Conceived in 1875 in response to the abrupt abolishment of the Edo-period system of funding the Gion Festival, the Seisei Kōsha played a central role in coordinating and raising funds for the festival. It still collects a considerable amount of contributions from its branches.

Among the twenty-five *kōsha*, the Miyamoto gumi are by far the most active in collecting donations from shops, companies, and private persons in the area. Donors are supplied with decorative paper markers and amulets, bestowing blessings and announcing to all their status as festival contributors. The Miyamoto gumi leads the Seisei Kōsha; the present secretary-general of the Seisei Kōsha, Imanishi Tomoo, is the former head of the Miyamoto gumi. Imanishi's background is typical: he is the owner of Kagizen 鍵善, a well-known Gion business that has produced and sold traditional Japanese sweets since the Kyōhō 亨保 era (1716–1736). He is also the publisher of a booklet on the Miyamoto gumi, which explains that the group's two main responsibilities are to provide funding

for the festival and to preserve (or, where possible, restore) the "Gion Festival of old" (Imanishi 2006, 72–73). The present head of the Miyamoto gumi is Hara Satoru 原 悟. Representing the same social group as Imanishi, Hara is the owner of Hara Ryōkaku 原了郭, a famous Gion-based shop specializing in traditional spices with a history that stretches back to 1703.

The Float Streets

The thirty-five floats are, as noted, run by as many preservation associations. The nature of these associations and their relations with the streets where the floats are based differ greatly. Satō Hirotaka (2016, 283–287) divides the float streets into three types:

Type A: streets that consist entirely of office buildings and have no or only very few residents (six floats)

Type B: streets where most residents live in rented accommodation (fifteen floats)

Type C: streets where most residents are owner-occupiers (fourteen floats).

The type A floats are concentrated in the vicinity of the Shijō-Karasuma intersection, while the type B and C floats are more randomly distributed in the streets further north, west, and south. The type A floats, including the Naginatahoko 長刀鉾 that always leads the first parade, benefit from the involvement of companies based in their streets. Their preservation associations often include employees of these companies. The companies in these streets can afford generous contributions, and the floats attract many visitors during *yoiyama*, partly due to their central location. The type B floats are typically located in streets with many rental apartments and few long-term residents, many of whom are elderly. Although there are exceptions, renters are usually not involved in (or even excluded from) the management of the festival, leaving some of these streets short of both hands and funds. The type C floats can draw on contributions from a rising number of inhabitants due to the recent spread of occupier-owned apartments built since the mid-1990s. In contrast to type B, residents of such apartments can be expected to contribute to and participate in the festival. In many streets, residents pay modest monthly contributions: for example, 250 yen per month per household in the case of Kuronushiyama 黒主山 float (Satō 2016, 287). This secures these floats a more stable financial basis.

Depending on the particular circumstances of each float and its street, the membership of the preservation associations may include long-term residents with generations of involvement; people who still have their business in a float street but now live elsewhere; newly arrived inhabitants who have a special interest in the festival; and employees of companies that have their offices in the float streets. Some floats have close connections to universities and draw on students

to carry out some of the labor involved in running the festival.[12] Conditions change as the composition of the streets changes, and both the preservation associations and their streets are in constant flux.

All Gion floats are members of an umbrella organization called the Yamahoko Rengōkai 山鉾連合会 (Yamahoko Floats Association). This association was founded in 1923 in response to an acute funding crisis. The crisis ended with Kyoto City agreeing to support the floats with subsidies for "reparation costs" in this year. A subsidy to cover about 10 percent of "event costs" was added in 1939. These subsidies were administered by the Floats Association, which also performed other tasks in the communication between Kyoto City and Kyoto Prefecture on the one hand, and the assembled float streets on the other. Today, the floats receive subsidies to cover the expenses for float reparations and for staging the parade. The Floats Association distributes these subsidies by dividing floats into two categories, large and small, and allocating around four million yen to the former and 1.3 million to the latter every year. Since 2018, the association has also conducted a crowdfunding campaign, where donors receive amulets and souvenirs in return. In 2020, this campaign raised a record fifteen million yen.[13] For minor floats in particular, subsidies and other contributions distributed by the Floats Association cover a sizable portion of their budget.

The Floats Association, which has an office in a disused primary school building in one of the float streets, takes on much of the paperwork related to these subsidies and has a coordinating rather than a managing function. All floats remain autonomous associations who make their own decisions. At times, however, the Floats Association has played a crucial role in pushing through changes. The association's chairman Yoshida Kōjirō 吉田幸次郎 initiated the campaign that in 2014 led to the revival of the second float parade on 24 July. Almost fifty years after the fusing of the two parades at the initiative of Mayor Takayama, Yoshida had to overcome differences in opinion between float streets, bureaucratic hurdles, opposition from the prefectural police, and skepticism about the economic feasibility of a second parade (Porcu 2020). Without a charismatic figure in such a central position, this would not have been possible. In 2020, the Floats Association coordinated the response of the thirty-five float streets. The chairman of the association in this year was Kimura Ikujirō, who took over in 2019. Kimura is the third-generation owner of a textile business specializing in kimonos, Manzokuya Kimura 万足屋きむら, and has long served as a leading member of the group of musicians connected to the Naginatahoko.

12. This is notable, for example, in the cases of Ayagasahoko 綾傘鉾 and Hashibenkeiyama 橋弁慶山.

13. "Yamahoko Rengōkai kuraudo fandingu: 1380 man'en, dai 1 kai koe" 山鉾連合会クラウドファンディング—1380万円、第一回越え, *Sankei shinbun* (Kyoto edition), 12 July 2020. The campaign continued for two more weeks after the publication of this article.

THE MIKOSHI ASSOCIATIONS

The third central group of actors are the *mikoshi* bearers. Each *mikoshi* has its own association of palanquin bearers, called the Sanwaka, Shiwaka 四若, and Nishiki 錦 associations. These associations coordinate numerous smaller groups under the Sanwaka, Shiwaka, or Nishiki banners. Those groups typically consist of neighbors, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances; some participate in other festivals as well. While Sanwaka has roots that go back to the Genroku 元禄 era (1688–1704), Shiwaka took over one of the *mikoshi* in the early years of Meiji, and Nishiki, named after the Nishiki market that forms its social base, took responsibility for the third in 1947. All three associations are based in places at some distance from the float streets. Sanwaka is located to the west, along Sanjō beyond Horikawa Street; Shiwaka to the east, near Keihan Sanjō station on the eastern side of the Kamo River, and Nishiki at the Nishiki market, east of the float streets. There is no overarching structure, and unless there is a special need, the three *mikoshi* associations deal directly with the shrine and the Miyamoto gumi in organizing the processions.

In the Edo period, carrying two of the *mikoshi* was the task of designated streets, originally clustered around two *otabisho*, while the third was carried by members of a clam-selling guild from Imamiya near Osaka.[14] For the first two, there was already in the early Edo period a tendency to hire laborers as *mikoshi* bearers. This practice was repeatedly banned by the city magistrates. A 1789 document, for example, condemns the hiring of "day-laborers from the countryside" as bearers, because this "naturally" led to "rough behavior and fights" (Nishiyama 2013, 37). In practice, however, there were few alternatives to hiring workers from the river ports and lumberyards of the city, and these workers became an integral part of the festival. The *mikoshi* associations emerged after Meiji as coordinators of such workers, from the Saga area along the Katsura River for Sanwaka, and the Kiyamachi area along the Kamo River for Shiwaka. Sanwaka exploited land for this purpose, collecting rents that were used to pay bearers. When this financing system declined, fundraising by the Seisei Kōsha covered some of the deficit. Today, contributions from people who live along the *mikoshi* route offer a significant addition to the budget. These contributions, like those to the Miyamoto gumi, are symbolized by paper markers that people display in their windows or shop fronts.

The Miyamoto gumi, the floats, and the *mikoshi* are the three most conspicuous groups of actors in the festival. Interviewing leaders of these groups in 2018, it became clear to me that their perspectives on the festival differ. In particular, they disagree on the relative importance of its two main constituent parts: the

14. Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 (1537–1598) abolished one of these *otabisho*, the Shōshōi 少将井, and had the other (Ōmandokoro 大政所) moved to its present site on Shijō Street.

floats and the *mikoshi*. The *yoiyama* in the float streets and the two float parades are the most famous events of the festival and enjoy the most public attention. The merger of the two parades disconnected the parades from the *mikoshi*; the return of the *mikoshi*, on 24 July, lost its parade completely. Celebration of the floats parade as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage further marginalized the shrine and the *mikoshi*. These developments have, in the eyes of the shrine, the Miyamoto gumi, and the *mikoshi* associations, led to an excessive focus on the floats and all the other events west of the Kamo River, while blotting out the "religious" shrine rituals that focus on the gods enshrined there, and the transfer of those gods to and from the *otabisho*.

The religious status of this part of the festival allows these groups to take the high ground. Some made disparaging remarks about the "commercialism" surrounding the floats, and as already noted, the many tourists who flock to the floats were already in the 1960s sometimes seen as a threat to the festival's authenticity. The float streets and their association, on their side, share this concern for authenticity and seek to prioritize faith, tradition, and community while accommodating tourism. Many floats strive to make the festival less excluding and more open to both women and non-locals, or even foreigners; people associated with these floats may look upon the Miyamoto gumi, in particular, as a clique with semi-feudal tendencies. There are also social tensions between, on one hand, the elite business owners (*dannashū* 旦那衆) that make up both the Miyamoto gumi and the leadership of some of the floats, and, on the other hand, the *mikoshi* bearers who may not all be "working class" people in real life but do perform that role. Yasaka Shrine, moreover, is closest to the Miyamoto gumi, which is central to its *ujiko* association. The priests cooperate and coordinate with the Floats Association and individual floats from a more detached position. Overall, there is a reluctance to get too involved in the affairs of other festival actors. All parties are careful to show each other due respect, are aware that they depend on each other, and cooperate where necessary, while making sure to stay out of each other's way.

Events in 2020

During the press conference on 20 April, head priest Mori was careful to emphasize that the Gion Festival was not in fact "canceled." Ritual worship of the gods of Yasaka Shrine would be performed with all the solemnity that the circumstances allowed for. Other actors shared this sentiment, and both the float streets and the *mikoshi* associations resisted the notion of a blanket cancellation. In April 2020, all groups of actors were already facing the task of finding a compromise between those who called for caution and others who pressed for new solutions.

As early as mid-March, the Floats Association had sent out questionnaires to the floats' preservation associations about possible responses to COVID-19. Opinions ranged from full cancellation to keeping options open. As noted, Kimura, the chairman of the Floats Association, was prepared to cancel the parade, but simultaneously postponed the decision whether the floats could at least be assembled in their street locations. In April, after all, there was still a sense of hope that the virus might well recede in the heat of summer. It was easier to let go of the parade than the assembly of the floats, which sets the scene for all rites and celebrations in the streets themselves. As we shall see, the feasibility of assembling the floats remained a topic of heated debate until mid-June.

The *mikoshi* associations, too, were not ready to give up in April. After the cancellation of the Aoi 葵 Festival (due on 15 May) had been announced on 31 March, media attention began to shift to the Gion Festival, adding to the pressure to reach some sort of conclusion. On 4 April, representatives of the Seisei Kōsha, the Miyamoto gumi, and the *mikoshi* associations met at Yasaka Shrine. The tenor of this meeting was that it might be difficult to allow the *mikoshi* processions to proceed as usual. According to one report, the Shiwaka head appealed to the assembly that his association was ready to take on the *mikoshi* processions on short notice, even if the final decision was postponed to July, adding: "I want you all to be aware of our feelings in this matter."[15] Initially, the Miyamoto gumi and the shrine appeared reluctant, while the *mikoshi* associations and at least some of the float streets were determined to avoid closing any doors at this early stage. The last glimmer of hope for the *mikoshi* disappeared when Prime Minister Abe's state of emergency reached Kyoto on 16 April. The press conference on 20 April precluded any U-turn, and the *mikoshi* processions were now definitely called off.

Yasaka Shrine demonstrated its determination to avoid all risks by closing its gates during Golden Week, between 29 April and 6 May, when many Japanese enjoy a rare extended holiday. Only a few other shrines and temples in Kyoto took such drastic measures; most allowed the public at least to visit their outside grounds and gardens, even if inside spaces were closed. With Yasaka Shrine locked down and almost all shops along Shijō Street shuttered, the Miyamoto gumi home base of Gion resembled a ghost town.

A New Goryōe

Even during this time, the shrine was thinking of new ways to respond to the COVID-19 crisis and, as head priest Mori put it, preserve the *hongi* of the Gion Festival. In April, May, and June, the shrine performed versions of the spirit-

15. Minoura Shigekatsu 箕浦成克, "'Sei' no Gion matsuri 1: Kabi sogiotoshi mieta, sono saki" 「静」の祇園祭 1—華美そぎ落し見えた、その先, *The Kyoto*, 13 July 2020. the.kyoto/article/3c2fb72a-e62e-4796-9c2c-d8fc49cc5bf5.

pacifying *goryōe* that harked back to the classical ritual procedures of the Heian period. There was a more recent precedent for this ritual in 1918, when *goryōe* were held in response to the deadly Spanish flu.[16] While the first two of the *goryōe* performed in 2020 went by largely unnoticed, the third drew some media attention, also because it was performed not at Yasaka Shrine but at the *goryōe*'s original site, the Shinsen'en, now located on the southern edge of Nijō Castle. Today, the Shinsen'en forms the precincts of a Shingon temple, and, accordingly, the planned ceremony was a Buddhist-Shinto collaboration in pre-Meiji style. It took place on 14 June, in front of the Zennyo Ryūō 善女竜王 Shrine that stands on top of the temple's "Dragon King" pond. To dispel the pestilence, the temple's priest, Torigoe Eitoku 鳥越英徳, chanted the *Heart Sūtra* and the mantra of Yakushi Nyorai 薬師如来. Mori recited a *norito* 祝詞 prayer, Yasaka priests burnt the medicinal herb *okera* 朮, and *miko* 巫女 from the shrine performed a *kagura* 神楽 dance.

The event was not announced to the public to prevent people from gathering, but it was attended by Kyoto's mayor, Kadokawa Daisaku 門川大作, and by invited journalists. Even with Kadokawa's presence, however, the public impact of this new *goryōe* remained minimal. Reportage on the ritual was limited to a few brief articles in local newspapers. This should not come as a surprise, considering that Kyoto abounds in ritual events throughout the year. From the viewpoint of performance and opportunities for active participation, the contrast between the festive *goryōe* of legend and the media-dominated event in 2020 could hardly be greater.

A New Procession

While this *goryōe* was still being planned, the state of emergency was lifted on 21 May. The new rules allowed gatherings of up to one hundred people inside and two hundred outside, on the condition that social distancing was observed. On the following day, Kitamura Norio 北村典生, a member of the Miyamoto gumi and owner of a small sushi restaurant called Izujū いづ重 that is located right in front of Yasaka Shrine's western gate, sent off a beautifully calligraphed letter to head priest Mori. The sending of this letter would later be celebrated in NHK reporting on the 2020 Gion Festival as a decisive moment. A forty-minute NHK documentary includes a scene where one of Yasaka Shrine's younger priests reads a few poignant passages from it. Lamenting the cancellation of the Gion Festival at a time when Kyotoites need consolation more than ever, Kitamura appealed to the shrine to stage an alternative Gion procession that would allow the nation (*kokumin* 国民) to "experience the best *matsuri* in a thousand years."

16. Minoura Shigekatsu, "'Sei' no Gion matsuri 1: Kabi sogiotoshi mieta, sono saki."

FIGURE 1. The horse carrying the *himorogi* that contains the gods of Yasaka Shrine returns from the *otabisho* on 24 July. All photos by Miyake Tōru.

FIGURE 2. A scene from the *daisha* 台車 processions through the neighborhoods that form Yasaka Shrine's *ujiko* area. Hara Satoru, the head of the Miyamoto gumi, sprays water from the Yasaka Shrine well in an act of purification and blessing at the headquarters of the Nishiki Mikoshi Association.

His proposal was to replace the *mikoshi* with a *himorogi* 神籬 (a set of *sakaki* 榊 branches hung with paper streamers), which would then be carried across the Kamo River to the *otabisho* on a white horse. The horse would be accompanied by Miyamoto gumi members carrying the divine treasures and by Yasaka Shrine priests.[17] Once installed in the *otabisho*, the Yasaka deities would then be carted around the twenty-five school districts that make up the *ujiko* area of the shrine, as a means of ritually cleansing the living space of Yasaka's parishioners and giving them the mental fortitude to face up to the epidemic.

According to the NHK documentary, the proposal took both the shrine priests and the Miyamoto gumi by surprise. The shrine was hesitant, fearing that any infections linked to shrine events would trigger a storm of protests. The National Association of Shrines (Jinja Honchō 神社本庁), which was mired in scandals at the time, was in lockdown itself and advised member shrines to take a similar stance of extreme caution. Strikingly, the meeting in which the Miyamoto gumi first discussed Kitamura's proposal took place in the presence of NHK cameras, and key moments of this meeting were later included in a number of NHK feature programs. The documentary shows fourteen men seated in a tatami room, wearing the association's *happi* 半被 coats and, of course, facemasks. We catch the moment when the group's head Hara introduces the proposal by "Kitamura Norio-*kun*" to the board members: even now that the *mikoshi* will stay put at Yasaka Shrine, the gods could and should be taken around to all of Yasaka's *ujiko*. The members appear surprised; a tense silence fills the room as the men cast cautious glances at each other. In another scene from the same documentary, one of Yasaka's priests visits Kitamura in the cluttered office above his shop. With a pencil, Kitamura artfully sketches how he imagines the procession from the shrine to the *otabisho* by horse, and he draws the cart (*daisha*) that might be used to transport the gods through all the school districts. The priest nods approvingly, and without further ado, it would appear, Kitamura's plan was set in motion.

The presence of cameras suggests that the Miyamoto gumi and the shrine had already decided that the narrative was going to be that the new procession was a spontaneous idea, conceived by "a sushi chef" (in the words of the NHK) who represents the common people of Gion.[18] Kitamura's proposal emphasized that the ultimate purpose of the festival was to protect the shrine's parishioners from disease and misfortune. While the shrine's *goryōe* were an interesting theological experiment that broke with the modern separation of Buddhism and Shinto

17. In an interview with Kitamura, Tanaka Sachimi quotes his proposal as follows: "Led by a purification wand, a short procession with a horse carrying *sakaki* fixed onto a saddle will pass through every back alley of the *ujiko* area in the summer evenings." "Matsuri no 'hongi' o shimeshita netsui" 祭りの「本義」を示した熱意, *Sankei shinbun* (Kyoto edition), 28 September 2020.

18. In fact, Kitamura is a leading figure in the Gion area as chairman of the Gion Shōtengai Shinkō Kumiai 祇園商店街振興組合 (Association for the Promotion of the Gion Shopping District).

and acknowledged the festival's Buddhist roots, these rituals failed to involve the people who were Kitamura's main concern: the *ujiko* in the twenty-five branches of the Seisei Kōsha.

Kitamura's plan was polished and honed into shape in discussions that must have taken place in late May and early June. On 10 July, the Miyamoto gumi carried out its first "proper" ritual of the season (in Hara's words), albeit with fewer members than usual. Twenty members walked down to the Kamo River, where they performed the gestures of collecting water for the purification of the *mikoshi* (*mikoshi arai* 神輿洗). Due to rain, which had caused the Kamo River to approach flooding levels, the act of dipping buckets into the river was abandoned and water from a well underneath the main hall of Yasaka Shrine was used instead.[19]

On 15 July, the kami were transferred from the shrine to the three *mikoshi* (*yoimiya* 宵宮). In normal years, the *mikoshi* receive the gods on the *maidono* 舞殿 stage in front of the main hall, but this year they remained in their storehouse adjacent to the southern shrine gate. Usually, the shrine grounds are packed with onlookers and worshipers for *yoimiya*. Both the Miyamoto gumi and the *mikoshi* associations turn out in large numbers, adding to the atmosphere by their contrasting codes of behavior: solemn for the Miyamoto gumi, lively for the *mikoshi* bearers. In 2020, however, only a few representatives of the Seisei Kōsha, the Miyamoto gumi, and the *mikoshi* associations were allowed to attend, in addition to a small selection of handpicked journalists, reporters, and photographers.[20] The *mikoshi* bearers, especially, felt excluded.

On 17 July, the day of the first parade and procession, the gods were conveyed from the *mikoshi* (still in their storehouse) to the three *sakaki* branches that made up the *himorogi*. The *himorogi*, placed on a specially designed saddle, was fastened to the back of a white horse, and the procession proceeded in a straight line to the *otabisho*, one kilometer westwards along Shijō where the gods were installed. The entire procession took no more than half an hour.[21]

During the following six days (18–23 July), another procession set out to tour all corners of the *ujiko* area in what was termed the "passage of the divine spirits" (*goshinrei togyosai* 御神霊渡御祭). The spirits were symbolized by three *gohei* 御幣 (folded paper stripes): one large golden one, and two smaller ones of white paper, which stood on a simple four-wheel cart, pulled and pushed along by four men. The cart was draped in colorful fabrics and topped by a red parasol to pro-

19. "Shukushuku to shinji yōsui kiyoharae" 粛々と神事用水清祓, *Sankei shinbun* (Kyoto edition), 11 July 2020.

20. "Honden no shinrei mikoshi e" 本殿の神霊神輿へ, *Sankei shinbun* (Kyoto edition), 17 July 2020.

21. Minoura Shigekatsu, "'Sei' no Gion matsuri 3: Sore demo kamigami wa wataru, keishō sareta sennen no inori"「静」の祇園祭 3—それでも神々は渡る、継承された千年の祈り, *The Kyoto*, 24 July 2020. the.kyoto/article/2fea3f4d-5253-4fc3-94ca-75e73d8b6662.

tect the *gohei* from the rain. The procession consisted of about twenty people, including a priest with a purification wand, two men with a drum, lantern carriers, and men bearing the placards and a banner reading "Seisei Kōsha branch no. 1, Miyamoto gumi." Most surprising for the people along the route was the presence of head priest Mori, clad not in his priestly robes but in the *happi* of a humble *mikoshi* bearer (Tanaka Sachimi, personal communication). Hara and Kitamura also joined the procession every day. The divine passage visited four or five districts a day, covering some thirty or forty kilometers in total.

The pronounced aim of this procession was to cleanse the area under Yasaka's protection of impurity or, in less theological terms, to give the *ujiko* an opportunity to pray to the Yasaka gods for protection and offer them encouragement in difficult times. The procession stopped at the homes of the local representatives of the district's Seisei Kōsha branch and its Fujinkai 婦人会 (Women's Association). Only these branch representatives were informed in advance; otherwise, the route was kept confidential in order to avoid crowds. It was up to the representatives to decide whether they should alert the neighborhood of the gods' passing. Some did, to "allow people here to see that the gods have arrived";[22] others preferred to prevent people from gathering by keeping the timing of the gods' passage to themselves. The representatives dressed up and welcomed the gods with prayers and refreshments. The procession also made a point of visiting the three offices of the *mikoshi* associations; as we will see, these visits turned out to be particularly meaningful. To almost all residents and passersby, the passage was a surprise, and people were caught unawares. After the sixth day, the Miyamoto gumi head Hara remarked that "a lot of people took pictures, but only a few worshiped the gods."[23] Those in the know, however, expressed gratitude for this unprecedented visitation. Many were especially impressed with the presence of the seventy-two-year-old Mori. When asked, Mori explained that he stood in for the *mikoshi* bearers. There is no doubt that the media neglected to report on his participation by his own request.

In an interview with Hara and Kitamura, written by Tanaka Sachimi for *Sankei shinbun*, Kitamura states that the view of Yasaka's closed gate from his shop window during Golden Week had filled him with a profound sense of wrongness.[24] Noticing a steady trickle of people stopping before the gate to pray,

22. Minoura Shigekatsu quotes the representative of the Inui District with these words (see "'Sei' no Gion matsuri 3: Sore demo kamigami wa wataru, keishō sareta sennen no inori"). He sent information about the timing of the procession's arrival around the neighborhood via the "circular notice" system (*kairanban* 回覧板).

23. Minoura Shigekatsu, "'Sei' no Gion matsuri 3: Sore demo kamigami wa wataru, keishō sareta sennen no inori."

24. Tanaka Sachimi, "Matsuri no 'hongi' o shimeshita netsui," *Sankei shinbun* (Kyoto edition), 28 September 2020.

he became convinced that something had to be done and came up with the idea to bring the gods to their *ujiko* in a manner that avoided crowding. Hara stressed that he saw it as his duty to make sure that, at the very least, the gods were moved to the *otabisho* and back. In this the shrine agreed with him, and thus Kitamura's plan was realized. A more sensible head, Hara pointed out, would never have been so insistent, but he was of the "warrior type" and held that a festival should be prepared to change format in response to the circumstances.

A New Parade

The presence of the gods in the *otabisho* provided the festival with a framework that created space for other actors. While the Miyamoto gumi and the shrine were working on their plans for an alternative procession, the Floats Association was still in the process of making a final decision about the possibility of allowing the assembly of floats to go ahead in some reduced form. The most eloquent testimony of this tense period is a piece written by one of the representatives of the preservation association of the Ōfunehoko 大船鉾, Kimura Nobusuke.[25]

Kimura Nobusuke (not to be confused with the chairman of the Floats Association, Kimura Ikujirō) recalls that the Floats Association called for the cancellation of the assembly of the floats in early May. Since each float is run by an independent preservation association, and since assembly is seen as an internal street event in contrast to the joint parade, such a cancellation could not be imposed. However, there was strong pressure on all floats to reach a consensus and make a unanimous decision. The debate came to a head at a general meeting of the Floats Association on 30 May. One side, including the Ōfunehoko representatives, argued that with the state of emergency lifted, the float streets should keep preparing for a possible assembly until the final deadline, 30 June. Others disagreed, and in the heat of the discussion, some threatened to resign from the association's board. It was the impression of one of my interlocutors, who was not present at the meeting but heard about the situation as a float street insider, that the more cautious (mostly elderly) members feared the floats might be branded as sources of infection, permanently destroying the narrative of the festival as an ancient measure against disease. More determined (mostly younger) members objected to this caution, claiming that the gods' protection ensured their safety and that no one would be infected during the festival; even if one were to be infected, this was a worthy cause. The meeting ended with a vote. A

25. Ōfunehoko, located in a type B street, was rebuilt in 2010–2014. Its restoration was a vital factor behind the 2014 revival of the second parade, which is closed by this grand ship-shaped float. Kimura Nobusuke, "Ōfunehoko hozonkai riji Kimura Nobusuke Gion matsuri wa ekibyō ni maketa no ka" 大船鉾保存会代表理事木村宣介祇園祭は疫病に負けたのか, *Kyoto Love. Kyoto* (blog), 24 November 2020. kyotolove.kyoto/I0000231.

proposal to postpone the final decision until 30 June was accepted by a majority of fifteen to eleven (plus one blank vote).

On 11 June, however, Kimura Nobusuke received notice from Kimura Ikujirō that thirty-two out of the thirty-four floats had now agreed to cancel the assembly of the floats. Neighboring floats, Nobusuke writes, confronted him, saying that if the Ōfunehoko insisted on going ahead with the assembly, it should leave the Floats Association. This, of course, was an economic impossibility. The Ōfunehoko then turned to Yasaka Shrine for help. There, however, they were told that "modern society is built on science and medicine," implying that "faith" should bow to public health warnings. The shrine priest who met Kimura Nobusuke further reminded him that the float events were "separate" from the shrine rituals and the *mikoshi* procession. In other words, the shrine referred to the administrative separation of the "secular" parades from the "religious" events associated with Yasaka Shrine, and in that manner avoided choosing sides in the conflict.

Kimura felt that the absence of the *mikoshi* made it all the more vital to at least set up the floats. He visited representatives of neighboring floats to ask whether they would be willing to tolerate a simplified two-day assembly of the Ōfunehoko. The unanimous answer was that the safety of participants, visitors, and local elderly residents in particular should have absolute priority. Kimura could only conclude that "even if there is a certain number of people who strongly believe in our gods and their power to dispel the disease, there are not enough of us to muster the combined force of the Floats Association in the present situation." Praying for more strength on another occasion, he wrote, "I fold my hands to the *kamisama* and persevere in my daily practice."[26]

It must be noted that such fervor was rare among the float streets, as the final outcome demonstrated. Some streets marked the beginning of the festival month (*kippu iri* 切符入り, on 1 July) in a restrained manner, others more elaborately.[27] Kankohoko 函谷鉾, for example, invited members of their preservation society, the carpenters who assemble the float every year, the regular "helpers" (*tettaigata* 手伝方), pullers (*kurumagata* 車方), and the float's musicians (*hayashikata* 囃子方) to the street house, where the seventy invitees worshiped the float gods in three cohorts, to avoid crowding.[28] Most streets, however, including the high-profile Naginatahoko, canceled all such in-house rituals. For most

26. Kimura, kyotolove.kyoto/I0000231.

27. See, for example, Ayagasahoko as documented by Miyake Tōru, "Gion matsuri wa ekibyō ni maketa no ka: Ayagasahoko kippu iri 2020 nen" 祇園祭は疫病に負けたのか—綾傘鉾吉符入り 2020年, *Kyoto Love*. *Kyoto* (blog), 1 August 2020. kyotolove.kyoto/I0000220.

28. Minoura Shigekatsu, "'Sei' no Gion matsuri 2: Yamahoko junkō naki, sono hi arawareta kamishimo sugata no otokotachi"「静」の祇園祭 2—山鉾巡行なき、その日現れた裃姿の男たち. *The Kyoto*, 18 July 2020. the.kyoto/article/af532470-2e26-471b-9419-0715e062280e.

people who would usually dedicate their summer to the Gion Festival, all events were simply called off. As far as they were concerned, "nothing happened."

In the meantime, the Floats Association developed its own response to the alternative processions organized by the Miyamoto gumi and Yasaka Shrine. Those processions were planned in the course of late May and early June, as already noted. Chairman Kimura Ikujirō was likely one of the first to hear about these plans. With the gods settled in the *otabisho*, inaction was not an option. Reportedly, Kimura thought that for the floats, too, using *sakaki* branches would be the only solution. Upon consultation with Yasaka Shrine, it was decided that representatives of the floats would perform alternative parades by proceeding to the *otabisho* on 17 and 24 July. Each representative would carry a *sakaki* branch and a paper streamer inscribed with the float's name. The route, from the Shijō-Karasuma intersection to the *otabisho*, followed the precedent of 1947–1948, when a much reduced parade (with just one float in 1947 and two in 1948) was pulled along this short stretch only.[29]

On 17 July, starting at 9 AM, twenty-three float representatives proceeded through the drizzle to the *otabisho*. There, a table had been set up facing east, in the direction of Yasaka Shrine; the gods, after all, would arrive at the *otabisho* only later that day. The float representatives performed "worship from afar" (*yōhai* 遥拝) at this spot in the order of the lots that had been drawn in the previous year. In 2020 the lot-drawing ceremony (*kujitori shiki* 鬮取り式) was canceled. Worshiping from a distance at the *otabisho* is a routine part of the usual performance of the first parade. New to the 2020 performance was the use of *sakaki* branches. On 24 July, representatives of the remaining eleven floats paraded to the *otabisho* by way of Sanjō and Teramachi Streets and presented their *sakaki* branches in front of the deities, who were now present in the form of three *gohei*, as in normal years.

The idea to use *sakaki* branches was clearly inspired by the procession and adopted in consultation with Yasaka Shrine. Kimura explained the meaning of the *sakaki* as *yorishiro* 依代 (objects that hold the gods' spirits), embodying the spirits of each of the thirty-four floats. On 17 July, Kimura told the *Sankei shinbun*: "I am happy that we were able to use *sakaki* branches as *yorishiro* of the gods, in replacement of the floats, and that we have succeeded in carrying out this parade as a ritual (*shinji* 神事) that cleanses the city."[30] While the presentation of the *sakaki* branches at the altar followed the common pattern of

29. Kimura Ikujirō, "Yamahoko Rengōkai rijichō ga kataru 'Gion matsuri wa ekibyō ni maketano ka'" 山鉾連合会理事長が語る「祇園祭は疫病に負けたのか」, *Kyoto Love. Kyoto* (blog), 24 November 2020. kyotolove.kyoto/I0000228.

30. "Gion matsuri sakimatsuri: Yamahoko junkō chūshi de kawari ni sakaki mochi toho junkō" 祇園祭前祭—山鉾巡行中止で代わりに榊持ち徒歩巡行, *Sankei shinbun* (Kyoto edition), 17 July 2020.

FIGURE 3. Members of the Sanwaka *mikoshi* association gather at the *otabisho* on 24 July to witness the transfer of the gods to the *himorogi* horse. Yoshikawa Tadao is wearing a blue polo shirt, fifth from the right.

FIGURE 4. The alternative parade of float representatives proceeds along Shijō Street towards the *otabisho* on 17 July.

tamagushi hōten 玉串奉奠 (the ubiquitous rite of offering *sakaki* branches at shrines), the intended meaning was different. The *sakaki* were deemed to have gathered up all impurity along the route, and they were to be "disposed of" after the parade (that is, by returning them to the shrine) in order to make sure that this impurity was removed. This procedure echoed current interpretations of the function of the floats. In normal years, the floats are disassembled immediately after returning to their streets. This practice, too, is commonly explained as a means of dispersing the impurity accumulated by the floats during their progress through the city.

From the perspective of the broader public, the parade was perhaps not a particularly interesting event. The media mentioned that it happened but concentrated largely on the Miyamoto gumi processions in their reporting. The number of parade participants was kept to a minimum, and even people who are usually closely involved with the floats had little opportunity to take part. All this reduced the procedure's impact, and there is no doubt that even a much-reduced float assembly would have made a much greater impression. Yet this symbolic replacement of the parade was important as a token that, like the Miyamoto gumi and the shrine, the floats honored their duty to keep the festival going.

The Mikoshi

The alternative procession was most disappointing to the third group of actors: the *mikoshi* bearers. Reflecting on the planning of that procession, Kitamura later stressed that he had wanted to make sure that the *mikoshi* bearers were not "left disheartened."[31] It was for this reason that the gods' passage through the *ujiko* area included visits to the three offices of the *mikoshi* associations. There, the accompanying Yasaka priest sprayed water from the Yasaka well over the assembled bearers, who responded with their traditional yells.

Yet, Yoshikawa Tadao, the secretary-general of the Sanwaka *mikoshi* association, gave a strikingly outspoken account of the mixed feelings that the members of his group experienced in the course of the 2020 festival. His account was published on 3 August 2020 on the website *Kyoto Love. Kyoto* as the eighth and final installment of the series *Gion matsuri wa ekibyō ni maketa no ka*, which was compiled at the initiative of Yoshikawa himself. Yoshikawa first linked his piece to a public post on his Facebook page on 1 August, with the words: "I can only write this with my feelings as a *mikoshi* person. I restrained myself during July, but now I put this out on Facebook. It has been a disheartening Gion Festival, but it also made me proud."

31. "Matsuri no 'hongi' o shimeshita netsui," *Sankei shinbun* (Kyoto edition), 28 September 2020.

Yoshikawa starts his tale by pointing out that the festival's "true meaning" was not merely to be found in the gods' crossing of the Kamo River but also "in the hearts of the *mikoshi* bearers," whose *happi* coats signal their determination to move the *mikoshi* "even if it costs us our lives." In April, when it was decided that the *mikoshi* would remain stationary within their Yasaka storehouse, this felt "as though my heart was ripped open." The Sanwaka head told Yoshikawa that even as late as 10 July (the day of the purification of the *mikoshi*), he would still be able to mobilize as many as eight hundred bearers; but it was not meant to be.

When the *mikoshi*-related rituals at Yasaka Shrine began, only the three *mikoshi* heads were allowed to attend. Yoshikawa laments the exclusion of his bearers as nothing less than "cruel." If the gods can be moved on the back of a horse, then what is the meaning of the *mikoshi* bearers' skills? Is it not their manipulation of the *mikoshi* that, in the words of head priest Mori, "intensifies the power of the gods"? On 17 July, when the gods were moved to the *otabisho*, a group of Sanwaka members positioned themselves on the opposite side of Shijō street. As the procession approached, they broke out in their customary yells—"*yo-oi*, *yo-oi*" and "*hoitto*, *hoitto*." Yoshikawa was unsure whether the priests and Miyamoto gumi members approved of this; if they did not, Yoshikawa writes, he "likes to believe that our calls expressed the feelings of the raging god [of the Sanwaka *mikoshi*], Susanoo."[32]

Similar scenes were repeated multiple times, culminating on 24 July, the day of the gods' return. As the horse approached Yasaka Shrine, the tension rose. Hara, the Miyamoto gumi head, later recalled that as the procession neared the shrine, he took the spontaneous decision not to simply pass by the western gate and proceed straight towards the southern gate, but to put on a bit of a performance.[33] After all, in normal years, the returning *mikoshi* used to meet here in front of a large, excited crowd and compete with each other in giving their *mikoshi* a good shake. The horse was stopped as it arrived at the intersection in front of the western gate and walked in circles three times. *Mikoshi* bearers from all three associations were already cheering. As the horse began to turn, a Shiwaka leader called out, "*mawase*, *mawase*" (the yell normally used to turn the *mikoshi*). Yoshikawa writes that this scene moved him to tears and notes that many around him were equally moved. From the priests and Miyamoto gumi members, he now received friendly nods.

Yoshikawa ends his account four days later, on 28 July. This is the day when the *mikoshi* are cleaned, ornaments are removed, and everything is stored away.

32. Yoshikawa Tadao, "Gion matsuri wa ekibyō in maketa no ka saishū banashi" 祇園祭は疫病に負けたのか最終話. *Kyoto Love*. *Kyoto* (blog), 3 August 2020. kyotolove.kyoto/I0000233.

33. "Matsuri no 'hongi' o shimeshita netsui," *Sankei shinbun* (Kyoto edition), 28 September 2020.

On this occasion, a larger number of *mikoshi* bearers were finally invited to be part of the procedures. For a few seconds, as the *mikoshi* were lifted into storage, they moved them up and down, in the usual manner. As the priests retired after the ritual, Mori stopped in front of the *mikoshi* leaders. Looking back on that spontaneous moment when the horse procession was met with the call "*mawase*," he told them that this scene had brought tears to his eyes. It is with this moment of mutual appreciation that Yoshikawa concludes his story. From his perspective, too, the *hongi* of the festival—the passion felt and expressed by the bearers—had been successfully retained in the face of the epidemic.

Meanings

The apparently simple word *hongi* carries many meanings. Yoshikawa found it in the physical and emotional experience of participating in the festival. For him, the festival derives its "true meaning" from its ability to arouse such emotions, and while narratives about the gods are important, they rank secondary. Other actors may agree, but in their contributions to Yoshikawa's *Kyoto Love. Kyoto* series they pay more attention to theological narratives and historical precedents. The need to create new ritual formats forced actors to decide what was so vital that it had to be kept and what was ultimately less essential and thus expendable. Even so, there remained a strong preference for vagueness when it comes to "explaining" the festival. As I have been told multiple times by many different caretakers, it is best not to theorize too much about the "logic" behind the ritual procedures because there are too many opinions even within these groups. The actors prefer to allow for a range of different readings of the festival's narrative to coexist, and the creative process of designing an alternative festival had to be conducted in such a manner that theological debates were avoided.

Changing the method of moving the deities was the key to realizing any kind of Gion Festival in 2020. It was the idea of replacing the *mikoshi* by a horse, first proposed by Kitamura, that provided the initial breakthrough for the 2020 process. How might Kitamura have conceived of this idea, and how was it refined into a concept that could pass muster as the festival's *hongi*? Kitamura has not spoken publicly of his source of inspiration, but it is tempting to associate his idea with the most classical and venerated text on Japan's festivals, Yanagita Kunio's *Nihon no matsuri* (1942). Based on a 1941 series of lectures, this book's conversational and easily accessible style made it an immediate bestseller. In a time when festivals were looked upon with ambiguity, as "private rites" (*shisai* 私祭) outside of the official repertoire of State Shinto, Yanagita argued that *matsuri* are the prime expression of Japan's "indigenous faith" (*koyū shinkō* 固有信仰), and therefore at least as worthy of study as the official liturgies performed by shrine priests. In a passage on the early antecedents of

present-day festivals, Yanagita argues that *mikoshi* are a rather late development. At an earlier stage, he suggests, the gods were moved to the festival site or *otabisho* by means of a horse (YANAGITA 1942, 44). Describing a visit to a summer festival at Ontake, Yanagita notes that the procession to the festival site included both a *mikoshi* and a horse equipped with "a special saddle carrying a *gohei* wand" (YANAGITA 1942, 47). This wand, he argues, must have been the original "seat" (*yorimashi* 依座) of the deity, which was retained even after the *mikoshi* took its place. Yanagita further claims that an even older method to mark the presence of a deity than the use of a *gohei* was to simply "set up a tree" (YANAGITA 1942, 67).

If the idea of moving the Gion deities to the *otabisho* with the help of *sakaki* branches on horseback drew on Yanagita's theory, there remained the issue that such a practice had no precedent in the specific context of the Gion Festival. The shrine priests, however, rose to the challenge. The NHK documentary includes a scene where a Yasaka priest unrolls a scroll from the shrine's archives, referring to an incident that took place in the year 1500.

After rehearsing the mythological origins of the festival in 869, Imanishi cites from reference materials used in the meetings where the new procession was planned, compiled by the same Yasaka priest who appeared in the NHK documentary:

> On the *himorogi* to be used for the passage of the deities to the *ujiko* area:
> *Himorogi* refers to a temporary ritual site, where a *sakaki* tree is set up as a *yorishiro* to hold the kami.
>
> Meiō 明応 9 (1500), fifth month, thirtieth day:
> Regarding the Gion Festival [due to start in the sixth month]: We have received notice that in this year, [the *mikoshi* processions] must be replaced with *sakaki* branches. We were repeatedly ordered that proceedings will have to be abridged drastically, but that we must concentrate our efforts on the kami rituals (*shinji*). All must attend to their duties in this regard. We have been informed that all who object to these orders must be reported and will be punished severely.
>
> The Gionsha office, Kiyofusa 清房 (signed), Motoyuki 元行 (signed)
>
> Meiō 9 (1500), sixth month, first day:
> Regarding the Gion Festival: We have protested that there is no precedent for [replacing the *mikoshi* with] a *sakaki* but were told repeatedly that the kami rituals must not be allowed to lapse, and that even if there is no such precedent, it will have to be done in this manner on this particular occasion. Our shrine has received strict orders that even if the Hie Festival is delayed, we must concentrate our efforts on the kami rituals; those who object to this will be punished severely. The Gionsha office, Kiyofusa (signed), Motoyuki (signed)

Daijōin shaji zōjiki 大乗院社寺雑事記, sixth month, eighth day
It appears that three new *mikoshi* have been readied [at the Gionsha].
(*Gionsha ki* 祇園社記)[34]

The year 1500 saw the revival of the Gion Festival after a lapse of thirty-three years caused by the Ōnin War (Ōnin no ran 応仁の乱, 1467–1477) that devastated Kyoto. The orders mentioned in the Gionsha records derived from the shogunal deputy (*kanrei* 管領) and hegemon of Kyoto, Hosokawa Masamoto 細川政元 (1466–1507). The Gionsha had been destroyed in the first year of the war. Although the shrine itself was rebuilt in 1493, the immensely expensive *mikoshi* were still not ready at the time. Masamoto first tried to revive the Gion Festival in 1497; already in that year, he had given orders for a *sakaki* procession as a replacement for the *mikoshi*. The Enryakuji 延暦寺 complex on Mount Hiei 比叡, however, stood in his way. The Hiei monks insisted that the Gion Festival could not go ahead before the festival of the Hie shrines was restored. Only after Masamoto's defeat of the monks at Mount Hiei in 1499 could the Gion Festival be restored. The note in the Kōfukuji 興福寺 record *Daijōin shaji zōjiki* suggests that the *mikoshi* were finished just in time for the first procession, which until 1877 took place on the seventh day of the sixth month (Kawauchi 2007). The *sakaki* procession, then, never actually happened.

As far as precedents go, this was not particularly convincing. The NHK presented this historical record from a viewpoint arguing that "the phantom Gion Festival (*maboroshi no Gion matsuri* 幻の祇園祭), planned after the Ōnin War, has finally sprung to life."[35] This interpretation ignores the fact that the idea of using a *sakaki* had been vigorously opposed by the Gionsha priesthood, who in the end managed to avoid such a stopgap measure.

More striking than the precedent itself, perhaps, is the perceived need for precedents. As we have seen, other actors also used precedents: the shrine referred to the *goryōe* of 869, the Miyamoto gumi (and, again, the shrine) to the *sakaki* branches of 1500, and the Floats Association to the parade route of 1947. Needless to say, these precedents refer to three very different phases in the festival's development and failed to produce a coherent structure for the new performance to build on. These precedents were adduced merely to provide a sense of historical continuity, and to render the novelties less vulnerable to potential critiques of arbitrariness and inauthenticity. Did this lack of coherence make itself felt, and, if not, how was it managed with such apparent success?

34. These reference materials for the Gion Festival of Reiwa 令和 2 (2020) were provided by the Yasaka priest Nakabayashi Ryō 仲林 亨. See Imanishi, "Gion matsuri wa ekibyō ni maketa no ka" 祇園祭は疫病に負けたのか, *Kyoto Love. Kyoto* (blog), 28 July 2020. kyotolove.kyoto/I0000214.

35. Narration from the NHK TV program, *Inori no genten ni: Koronaka no Gion matsuri*, broadcast on 24 September 2020.

The shrine priests looked to the very origins of the festival and located its "original meaning" in the Heian-period *goryōe*. They stressed the importance of the well underneath the main hall of the Yasaka Shrine, and the significance of the original site of the festival, the Shinsen'en with its ancient pond. Some priests, at least, explain the festival as a proto-scientific procedure based on *onmyōdō* 陰陽道 (the way of yin and yang), focusing specifically on water. The use of water for this well in 2020 reflected this interpretation.

For the Miyamoto gumi, the essence of the festival lies in the transfer of the deities from the shrine to the *otabisho*. In fact, the booklet *Miyamoto gumi* 宮本組, which is distributed by the group to this day, fronts the theory that the so-called "washing of the *mikoshi*" signifies the transfer of the gods of the Kamo River, via Yasaka Shrine, to the *mikoshi*. Calling this rite "washing of the *mikoshi*," the author claims, is a misnomer, because in reality, the buckets that the Miyamoto gumi members dip into the Kamo River serve to contain and transport the river gods to the shrine and the *mikoshi*.[36] This rite, he argues, corresponds to the *mikagesai* 御蔭祭 at Shimogamo 賀茂御祖 Shrine or the *miare* 御生れ rite at Kamigamo 上賀茂 Shrine: it is an ancient procedure to call the gods from their true dwelling places in nature to sites of human worship.

Both the shrine and the Miyamoto gumi downplay the significance of the floats parade, which developed in the fifteenth century. The Floats Association, of course, disagrees. As we have already seen, the association understands the floats as *yorishiro*, vehicles containing deities and spirits. By pulling the floats along a set route, the parades circulate the gods of the streets through the city while collecting the spirits that cause illness. The *hoko* (halberds) and the *yama* 山 (hills) can be replaced by *sakaki* branches because of their functional equivalence: they carry gods and attract spirits, bringing blessings and removing impurity at the same time.

It is not difficult to find critiques of the theologies of all actors involved. The Shinsen'en legend that is stressed by the shrine has been shown to be a product of the sixteenth century. The customary visit of the *mikoshi* to the site of the Shinsen'en, which is sometimes adduced as proof for a continuity of practice going back to 869, first emerged in the Edo period as a reflection of sixteenth-century theological innovation (Honda 2014).[37] Yet, in a recent talk, the Yasaka priest Nomura Akiyoshi (2020) referred to the Shinsen'en connection as an

36. This is argued in a brief text explaining the history and functions of the Miyamoto gumi written by Sugiura Kikuzō 杉浦貴久造, a Miyamoto gumi member who is well known for his activities for the preservation of traditional *machiya* 町屋 architecture in the Gion area and beyond (Imanishi 2006, 72–73).

37. The Yoshida 吉田 house claimed the leading role in the Shinsen'en *goryōe* and extended this to the revived Gion Festival after 1500. The Yoshida theory was elaborated further in the course of the Edo period, and became established as the standard origination legend of the festival in the early nineteenth century.

undisputed historical fact. Nomura further expanded on the notion that the festival procedures are based on what in the ancient period was "cutting-edge technology" for the "purification of the city's water and air." The fine-tuned scheme of those procedures, however, had been disturbed by the cessation of the festival after the Ōnin War, the redrawing of Kyoto's boundaries by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the reforms of the Meiji period (including the Shintoization of the shrine, the closing of the "dragon well" under Yasaka's main hall, and the rescheduling of the festival on the basis of the Gregorian calendar), and the postwar reforms that have prioritized tourism over ritual correctness. Nomura's speculations go far beyond the academic consensus, since they cannot be backed up with documentary evidence.

The Miyamoto gumi's interpretation of the washing of the *mikoshi* draws on the ideas of Yamaji Kōzō, a folklorist specializing in the history of folk arts (Yamaji 2009, 36). Yamaji's hypothesis, however, lacks sources and is poignantly ignored by festival historians like Kawauchi Masayoshi. The Float Association's interpretation of the floats as objects that hold the gods' spirits is equally contentious. Ueki Yukinobu, a historian who is intimately involved in the preservation of the Gion floats and leader of a major research project investigating float festivals throughout Japan, points out that the *yorishiro* theory derives from the work of Orikuchi Shinobu 折口信夫 (1887–1953), who invented this term in a 1915 essay. Ueki stresses that there are multiple types of floats with different functions and distinct histories and that Orikuchi's *yorishiro* theory has impeded the study of those histories (Ueki 2001, 22). Just as strikingly, the Yasaka priest Nomura likewise rejected the Floats Association's interpretation of the parade. He dismissed the notion that the floats are disassembled immediately after the parade in order to dispel the evil spirits that they have collected along the route. Wouldn't those spirits simply accumulate in the floats' storehouses only to be released again when the doors are opened?

This theological plurality, however, was studiously avoided in media reports after the festival had come to an end. Both the newspapers (*Kyōto shinbun* and *Sankei shinbun*, in particular) and the NHK referred with obvious reverence to an undefined "faith" as the essence of the 2020 festival without ever asking what that faith might entail. On 24 September 2020, for example, the NHK aired *Inori no genten ni: Koronaka no Gion matsuri*. At the end of this program, the narrator announced: "In this manner, the *hongi* of the Gion Festival was also upheld in this year." These words were accompanied by shots of people bowing their heads in prayer as the procession made its rounds of the school districts. After the program ended, a female and male announcer offered some final remarks. The female announcer was "moved that in this difficult time with the novel coronavirus, everyone, young and old, is folding their hands." The male announcer agreed and added that he was struck by the "strong determination" of the

festival's actors to offer people "an opportunity to pray" for this epidemic to end; surely, it was that determination that had helped the festival survive for 1,150 years. The 2020 Gion Festival, then, was not an improvised novelty but represented an unbroken tradition of centuries of prayer and faith.

Communal Faith as Public Cultural Heritage

The comments of the NHK announcers, as bland as they may be, reflect changing attitudes to religion and faith within the public sphere. As a cultural property (*bunkazai* 文化財), the float parade belongs to the subcategory of "festivals (faith)" as established in the revised Law for the Preservation of Cultural Properties (Bunkazai Hogo Hō 文化財保護法) of 1975.[38] The naming of this category itself indicates how the field of heritage policy has utilized a particular distinction between faith and religion. Under Japan's secular constitution, "religion" must be contained within the private sphere. "Faith," on the other hand, has been used as shorthand for cultural values, related to but independent of "religion," that are worthy of preservation. In this context, faith is differentiated from belief in the doctrines of a specific religious group or sect. In contrast to sectarian beliefs, faith is understood as an inner, cultural essence that gives meaning to places, buildings, objects, and performances, and thus authenticates them as valuable expressions of Japanese art and history.

Faith and related terms for "quasi-religious practice as non-sectarian culture" have their roots in the discipline of folklore studies or ethnology (*minzokugaku* 民俗学), notably in Yanagita Kunio's concept of a Japanese "indigenous faith." The distinction between "faith as shared culture" and "sectarian religion" has been an important principle in the selection of cultural properties throughout the postwar period. In the case of festivals, it has taken the form of selecting "folk performances" (*geinō* 芸能) for designation, while excluding the "rituals" of religious actors, notably professionals associated with religious organizations. For the Gion Festival, this means that the parade has been celebrated, marketed, and supported financially as cultural heritage, while the *mikoshi* and shrine rituals are excluded. To add to the confusion, different rules apply to tangible and intangible cultural properties. Religious buildings and art objects have enjoyed

38. The festival's "career" within the Japanese heritage system began in 1952 as an intangible cultural property (*mukei bunkazai* 無形文化財). The floats were designated as important folk materials (*jūyō minzoku shiryō* 重要民俗資料) in 1962 (after 1975 relabeled as important tangible folk cultural properties [*jūyō yūkei minzoku bunkazai* 重要有形民俗文化財]), and the float parade as an important intangible folk cultural property in 1979. In 2009, the float parade was among the first group of Japanese elements to be inscribed in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In 1962 there were only twenty-nine floats; the five floats that have been revived since then have been designated by Kyoto City as tangible folk cultural properties on the municipal level (TEEUWEN 2020a).

state protection (as national treasures or in lesser categories) since 1897 and have continued to do so also under the postwar constitution. Intangible cultural properties, which were added in 1950 during the Occupation period, must adhere to a stricter secularist logic. In 2020, the irony of this situation was palpable. On 16 October 2020, the Council for Cultural Affairs (Bunka Shingikai 文化審議会) forwarded to the Agency for Cultural Affairs its recommendation that Yasaka Shrine's main hall be listed as a national treasure, and twenty-six shrinelets dotted around the precincts as important cultural properties. Meanwhile, the "religious" parts of the Gion Festival remain out of bounds.

As pointed out by Mark Mullins (2012) and Ernils Larsson (2020), the place of religious events in the public sphere is still a contentious issue. The idea that Shinto-related events, in particular, represent a natural, ethnic form of "faith" that is somehow different from "specifically religious" belief—to quote a phrase used on the occasion of a G7 excursion of world leaders to the Ise shrine in 2016—is an expression of "Japan's spiritual culture" (*Nihon no seishin bunka* 日本の精神文化) (Larsson 2020, 409). In recent years, it has become standard practice to allow public sponsorship of events with clear religious overtones, as long as they involve actors from multiple religious groups. Irit Averbuch (2011) presents the case of the *nunohashi* 布橋 rite at Mount Tateyama 立山, reenacted under the banner of a "culture of healing" (*iyashi no bunka* 癒しの文化) at the initiative of the prefectural authorities in 1996. Ian Reader (2020) points at the usage of "culture" and "faith" and the avoidance of "religion" in the process of nominating the Shikoku pilgrimage as a candidate for UNESCO's World Heritage list. While the first application, submitted to the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 2007, stressed pilgrimage culture (*henro no bunka* 遍路の文化) and avoided all references to religion, the second (submitted in 2016) made extensive use of the concept of "faith." Reader describes this strategy as a way to introduce religion "in a 'nonreligious' way" (Reader 2020, 191).

How does this rhyme with the celebration of "faith" and "prayer" as the true meaning of the Gion Festival in 2020? First, it should be noted that these terms are part of a triadic structure: "faith" is differentiated from "religion" on one flank, and "tourism" on the other. In this structure, faith mediates between religion and tourism and makes it possible to authenticate their coexistence. Tourists (and other spectators) are endowed with a carefully unspecified faith, while the shrine is pried loose from a narrow sectarian identity as a Shinto institution. As we have seen, the shrine is an active party in this loosening; strikingly, the term "Shinto" has been completely absent both from actors' accounts and media reports on the 2020 Gion Festival. The Floats Association likewise stresses faith and prayer. In a 2014 interview with Elisabetta Porcu, its former chairman Yoshida Kōjirō stressed that the gaze of the tourist should not be mistaken for mere "viewing"; it is no less than a method to "welcome the gods" and a form of worship in itself

(Porcu 2020, 61–62). Faith, then, serves two purposes: it bestows meaning on the parade as an expression of faith-based culture, and it allows religious actors (that is, actors labeled as religious by the legal system) to enter the public sphere as representatives of this same communal culture of faith, rather than a private, sectarian creed.

The discourse of faith also opens some space for the city and prefecture of Kyoto to navigate the constitutional separation of state and religion. In 2020, both the Kyoto City Division for the Protection of Cultural Properties (Kyōtoshi Bunkazai Hogoka 京都市文化財保護課) and the Agency for Cultural Affairs kept a professional distance from the alternative festival.[39] They limited themselves to observing and recording events as they developed. Subsidies for float maintenance were paid out to the preservation associations as in normal years. The prefectural police, too, cooperated actively to make the 2020 events possible, attending meetings at Yasaka Shrine and providing security to the processions and the *sakaki* parades. All this, it should be noted, is standard practice, developed through negotiations that can be traced back to the Occupation period.

What was special in 2020, however, was the leading role of the Miyamoto gumi both in the festival's design and in the media coverage. In its quest for the festival's *hongi*, media outlets like NHK and the *Sankei shinbun* stressed the importance of faith as a source of strength in difficult times and commended the festival's actors for giving people an opportunity to pray. Strikingly, it was the "religious" part of the festival that was now held high as a valuable expression of faith: the Miyamoto gumi was singled out for praise and exposure, while the alternative float parades were covered much less expansively. This pattern represented a break with earlier practice, where mainstream media have primarily focused on the parades and maintained a more secular tone. The media here reflect a broader re-appreciation of faith and prayer as the beating heart of Japanese cultural heritage.[40]

Conclusion: Making New History in an "Authentic" Manner

Authenticity is a complicated concept because it operates on multiple levels at the same time (Fillitz and Saris 2013). To the antiquarian or the art collector,

39. The contribution of section head Nakagawa Keita 中川慶太 to the *Kyoto Love. Kyoto blog* series simply lists different categories of maintenance subsidies, while abstaining from any commentary on the events as they unfolded in that year. See "Kyōtoshi bunkazai hogo kachō Nakagawa Keita 'Gion matsuri wa ekibyō ni maketa no ka'" 京都市文化財保護課長中川慶太「祇園祭は疫病に負けたのか」, *Kyoto Love. Kyoto* (blog), 5 August. kyotolove.kyoto/I0000230.

40. Another striking example of this discourse is the current series "Representation of prayer" (*Inori no katachi* 祈りのかたち), offering a range of performances of traditional arts in front of the Imperial Palace. This series is organized by Japan Cultural Expo, a program of the Agency for Cultural Affairs and the Japan Arts Council in connection with the Tokyo Olympics.

authenticity is based on documented provenance. Objects are authenticated by certifying that they are made of original materials, produced in an original setting, and have a history of use for original purposes. Experts who administer policies of cultural preservation assess performances, rituals, or traditional events based on similar criteria. In the case of the Gion Festival, the Agency for Cultural Affairs applies strict standards of authenticity to the floats parade and the individual floats as cultural properties. Likewise, Yasaka Shrine attaches great importance to historical "correctness," and has a history of protesting against innovations (notably the parades' rerouting in 1956 and their merging into a single parade in 1966) by referring to the sacredness of authentic ritual precedent.

Being "authentically old," however, is not enough for an object or an event to maintain value. Physical age must be combined with a narrative of intangible meaning embodied by the object or the event. Intangible meaning can even compensate for a lack of material age. The floats, for example, are considered authentic (and therefore worthy of publicly subsidized preservation) because their present design adheres closely to historical evidence, even while the materials used to assemble them are new. In spite of the fact that the floats are, in effect, modern copies, the fact that they embody the intangible skills, tastes, and, indeed, faith of the street communities renders them authentic.

Authenticity, then, is a function of the meanings attributed to objects by people, rather than a physical trait. Such meanings are construed by experts, social groups, and individuals alike. By surrounding oneself with authentic objects, or attending and participating in authentic events, people find new ways to be "true to themselves." They can do this by associating themselves with a collective tradition or, conversely, by distancing themselves from mainstream culture and finding authenticity in an alternative way of life.[41] Participation in festivals functions in both ways: the company employee who spends his days in an office may find authenticity in joining a *mikoshi* group, with both the physical exertions and the camaraderie that come with bearing the *mikoshi*. The shop owner who volunteers for the Miyamoto gumi, the teacher who plays the flute in a *hayashi* musical group, or even the tourist who displays a *chimaki* amulet in her home may feel that the time, effort, and money invested have given them an experience of belonging, pride, and meaning. In all these cases, the festival offers a form of "sociality" that is felt as authentic and real, both because it takes participants out of the usual round of work and family, and because it offers them opportunities for individual self-realization within a distinct social setting with its own set of values (Sjørslev 2013).

41. Roemer (2010, 495, 504) argues that "positive self-evaluations within this festival context are an important component of [the participants'] positive well-being," while also pointing out that for some, the festival has become a meaningless "tedious task."

In 2020, the Gion Festival had to manage without access to its main sources of authenticity. The floats, the *mikoshi*, and almost all other trappings of the festival's material links with the past remained in their storehouses. The traditional performances with their inscrutable but time-honored symbolism were all canceled. Physical crowds were replaced by NHK cameras and media reporters. Yet, in contrast to almost all other festivals in the summer of 2020, actors came up with creative alternatives that not only succeeded in attracting positive media attention, but also left many of the participants with a feeling of pride. A new form of authenticity, it would seem, was created out of thin air.

Christoph Brumann has argued that the Gion Festival offers a counterexample to the thesis that "marking things out as heritage leads to their falsification, petrification, desubstantiation, and enclosure" (BRUMANN 2009, 277). Events in 2020 support Brumann's reading. In this year, the many actors of the Gion Festival "not only remain[s] linked with a relatively undistorted past but [is] also allowed to have a future" (BRUMANN 2009, 284). Of course, not all participants, let alone all ordinary Kyotoites, were as impressed as media reports may suggest. Some of the people I spoke to found the alternatives uninspiring, felt left out, or had hoped for more. In the never-ending struggle to retain authenticity, however, 2020 marked a decisive victory. In coming years, 2020 will no doubt be referred to as a year when the festival proved that it is "for real" and not a mere tourist show. Surely, that is more than anybody could have hoped for in April.

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