

An Introduction to the Anthropology of Japan: Focus on *Matsuri*

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Abstract: I have been teaching an introduction to the anthropology of Japan for more than five years, to students of various cultural backgrounds, and it is not always an easy enterprise. Ethnology in itself represents the comparative study of two or more cultures, but when students are just discovering the basics of a new subject, comparing various aspects of various cultures can often become confusing.

This paper will focus on the introduction of concepts related to Japanese festivals (*matsuri*) which are usually unfamiliar even to Japanese students. As in any research field, defining the operating concepts is the first thing that has to be done when focusing on Japanese festivals, and I will show how I introduce some of these concepts both to Japanese and international students, using written and visual materials. The purpose of the class is to enable students to identify the various elements of a festival, their role in the ritual process, as well as the general structure of the ritual.

Keywords: *matsuri*, ritual, cultural anthropology

Introduction: Cultural anthropology and ethnology classes

The present paper is a sample of the *matsuri* (festival) focused classes I have been teaching since 2010, when I started with an advanced Japanese language class (reading-comprehension) for international students at the Center for Japanese Language and Culture, Osaka University. Since I do not have a background in linguistics, I decided to focus on *minzokugaku* (ethnology) texts, sometimes accompanying the reading and discussion with various visual materials. At that time, I was fortunate to have students with a very high level of Japanese, so we could focus more on content than on language, and that is how I began developing my *matsuri*-centered classes. I currently teach two cultural anthropology classes at the Graduate School of Humanities and Faculty of Letters, Kobe University, both related to Japanese festivals. One is for students of the Graduate School of Humanities, taught in Japanese, and it does not raise any serious problems, since the participants

have a background in humanities and are either native speakers, or have near native fluency in Japanese. More difficult is the second one, which is part of the Global Humanities program at Kobe University and students from all faculties are allowed to enroll. As a result, I end up with an eclectic group of students, of various ages, academic backgrounds, and nationalities. The classroom language is English, as many of the international students are not proficient enough in Japanese (particularly science majors who start studying Japanese after their arrival in Japan, so their ability is basic at most), but that does not mean that all students are highly proficient in academic English. Another difficulty is the fact that many Japanese students come to ask me whether they can take this class as a “challenge”, to see how they would manage in an English-only class, without realizing that the syllabus content and requirements are different from those of an English conversation class.

With these issues in mind, I have tried to design an academic syllabus that would help the students understand what Japanese festivals are, and what is their role in Japanese society, from a perspective based on cultural anthropology and ritual studies concepts, so that they would be able to go beyond the tourist level of merely enjoying a Japanese festival because it is colorful and entertaining.

Course structure and content

In 2016, Kobe University adopted the quarter system, which means that the old semester is divided into eight plus eight classes, with the eighth and sixteenth classes allotted for examinations. For the spring quarters (the *matsuri* discussed change according to season, as I encourage my students to go and observe festivals directly), my course is structured as follows.

1. Introduction. Basic concepts (cultural anthropology, ethnology, folklore, 民俗学, cultural relativism, ethnocentrism, ritual)
2. The structure of a ritual. What is matsuri?
3. Elements of a matsuri I
4. Elements of a matsuri II
5. Fertility rituals
6. Aoi Matsuri and traditions of the old capital
7. Saka Kudashi Matsuri and ascetic practices
8. Review

9. Ritual objects
10. Otaue Matsuri at Sumiyoshi Shrine
11. Gion Matsuri—sacred & social rituals
12. Tenjin Matsuri—sacred & social rituals
13. Sumiyoshi Matsuri
14. Review & discussion
15. Student presentations
16. Student presentations

For each topic, I assign some reading (an article from an academic journal or a book chapter), which the students have to prepare before class, so that they would be able to take part in the discussion. I begin the class with a short lecture (usually a PowerPoint presentation, as the visual element is very important in this class), introducing the basic concepts and ideas, after which I highlight the main topics for discussion from the article the students had to read. The students will then discuss the topics (and even raise new ones) in groups, trying to apply the concepts they have already become familiar with. Initially, the course was structured so that by the fourth or fifth class, the students would be able to choose a research topic for their final presentation (see Appendix 1 for the Final Presentation Guidelines), but due to the introduction of the quarter system, I now have to grade them after week eight. Seven weeks or less (since this is an elective class, during the first three weeks students go to various classes before choosing the one where they want to enroll) is not enough to prepare an academic presentation, so for the first assessment they have to do small scale research, either discovering a local event that they can attend and later analyze, or focus on one of the topics mentioned in class, and find more details about it.

As mentioned before, it is my goal to help the students understand the meaning of Japanese festivals and their role in contemporary society (Japan is undoubtedly the technologically advanced country with the largest number of festivals), and their progress is obvious when comparing their first and second presentations. If for the first short presentation I get descriptions such as “There was this dance which seemed slightly uncoordinated, and I think it was simply because they wanted to dress up and dance”—referring to the famous Dragon Dance performed during Tenjin and Sumiyoshi Matsuri—the final presentations are well structured and research focused, with titles such as “Chikuraku Matsuri and bamboo as a ritual object”, or “Niinamesai in China and Japan.”

When introducing the structure of a Japanese festival, I begin with the basic structure of a ritual as described by Ronald Grimes (2001, see Appendix 2), followed by the three stages of a *matsuri*: *kami oroshi/ mukae*, *kami asobi*, and *kami okuri*. Both the structural component and the ritual objects used are present in all *matsuri*, and that is the reason there are two classes on the “Elements of a *matsuri*” topic. These are also the classes that are the most difficult from a linguistic point of view. When it comes to describing the various elements pertaining to Japanese rituals, a comprehensive description in English is sorely lacking. Herbert Plutschow does include many of these elements in his “*Matsuri. The Festivals of Japan*”, but his perspective and organization are slightly different from mine, which means that I cannot always refer my students to his book. The resources in Japanese are abundant, but the language used is difficult even for native speakers, not to mention learners of Japanese at the beginner level. I do, however, want my students to become familiar with the necessary concepts in Japanese, particularly since many of them do not have an equivalent in other languages. To this purpose, I create handouts in Japanese (see Appendix 3), which I explain in English with practical examples.

Demo lesson—Elements of a *matsuri*. Goshintai

The concept of *goshintai* and others related to it (such as *yorishiro*, or *iwakura*) are central to the understanding of Shinto rituals and Japanese festivals, both as phenomena specific to Japanese culture, and in comparison to other cultures/contrasting them to the concept of idol worship. The class is structured as follows.

- a) Explanation of concepts.
- b) Examples. As examples, I use Honen Matsuri from Tagata Shrine in Aichi Prefecture, and Ombashira Matsuri from Suwa Shrine in Nagano Prefecture. Honen Matsuri was selected because the *goshintai* is an enormous wooden phallus—a good opportunity to discuss the idea of sacred sexuality in Japanese tradition, contrasting it with the radically different Christian perspectives on the topic.



Goshintai (Tagata Shrine)



Ombashira (Suwa Shrine)

Ombashira is a festival that takes place every seven years, thus having a greater impact both on the local community (for whom it is a much awaited and long prepared event) and Japan as whole (recently, there are tours organized by travel agencies that book viewing seats to the main events). Both festivals are rich in sacred symbols that can be analyzed in relationship to the myths and legends underlying them, the structure and evolution of rituals, and their role in the daily, profane life. For Honen Matsuri I use visual materials I collected during fieldwork conducted in March 2015 and 2017, and for Ombashira I use both my materials (collected in 2016) and the video made and sold by Suwa Shrine.

I chose these festivals because they are indeed spectacular—there is much laughter in class when the students first see the phalli omnipresent at Honen Matsuri, not just the wooden *goshintai*, but also phallus-shaped candy and hot dogs, as well as exclamations of surprise when they watch men ride a tree trunk that is dropped from the top of a steep slope at Ombashira. The images thus achieve a double purpose: the events themselves are memorable, and I use them to guide the students beyond being passive, ignorant observers, and into an educated appreciation of the event, one where they can identify sacred symbols and ritual objects, and where they can make connections between festival and daily life, on one hand, and Japanese tradition and similar practices in the world cultures, on the other.

c) Group discussion based on the information presented and the text they had to read in advance (Minoru Sonoda—“The Traditional Festival in Urban Society”).

In groups of three or four, the students first discuss some of the concepts described in

the article, with reference to the examples given above (where possible). Next they apply critical thinking in raising issues related to the article. Some of the examples that came up are:

- “Although social mobility might make it harder to retain cohesion in the community, I don’t think the loss of that *ujigami* and *ujiko* cannot be assumed inevitable, although perhaps I just don’t quite know why it would clearly be inevitable. Now in 2017 though it seems clear that, like said and predicted in the paper, some *matsuri* are almost purely social and festive (mobilization) in nature and have lost most of their symbolization.”
- “I would like to object to the choice of this particular Shinto festival, as it cannot be seen as representative for every *matsuri* in contemporary urban society. Although the structure and the historical development of the Kanda festival are indeed worth of note, it is exactly because of its historical situation (e.g. the replacement of the original *ujigami* and the loss of importance of the two fraternities) that I argue that the loss of symbolic value of the Kanda festival is not replicated to the same extent in every Japanese *matsuri*.”

I have been teaching this course in its current format for only two years, and I think it may be too easy to draw definite conclusions, yet it is my impression that I am reaching my goals. Regardless of their nationality or Japanese language ability, the students who take this class become familiar with the structure of a Japanese *matsuri*, learn to identify its basic elements (and remember the key concepts in Japanese), and, more importantly, become able to place such events in social contexts, both local and universal. I insist on the relationship between universal and culture specific elements, with the goal of dispelling the myth of the “unique” Japan, focusing instead on features that are present throughout human history. Although my class is an introduction to the topic, addressed to students from a wide variety of academic backgrounds, I attempt to share information from an academic perspective, emphasizing the difference between casual observer and informed participant. It is also one of the purposes of the class to help students acquire methodology that will help them analyze, or simply place in a clear social and cultural context, future similar practices that they might encounter.

Appendix 1

最終発表のガイドライン・Final presentation guidelines

テーマ・Topic

日本の祭り・伝統的な行事（比較分析可）**A Japanese festival (matsuri) or annual custom**

発表の構成・Presentation structure

1. テーマ・Topic

(ア) 祭り・行事の簡単な紹介・Briefly describe the event.

(イ) 具体的なテーマについて明らかに述べる。（例：天神祭における火と水のシンボルリズム）

Clearly state the specific topic (ex. Fire and Water Symbolism within Tenjin Matsuri)

2. 分析・Analysis

(ア) 授業で学んだ概念を使い、祭りの様々な要素の意味とその役割を明らかにする。Use the concepts discussed in class to explain the meaning of the various elements of the festival, and their role.

(イ) 比較的な分析も可能である。A comparative analysis is acceptable.

(ウ) 選択したテーマを明らかにする。Make sure to clearly explain your chosen topic.

(エ) 現代社会における意味についても述べる。Refer to the relevance of the event in contemporary society.

3. 結論・Conclusion

(ア) 内容をまとめて、オリジナル解釈があれば、強調する。Sum up your ideas and emphasize your original contribution.

4. 参考文献・Bibliography

(ア) 研究論文を二つ使う。（本など）Use two written academic sources.

(イ) 社寺のオフィシャルホームページ以外にインターネット資料の使用はご遠慮ください。Refrain from using internet resources other than the official websites of temples and shrines.

Appendix 2—Ritual Structure (Ronald Grimes)

■ Ritual space

- Where does the ritual enactment occur—indoors, outdoors, in a ~~an~~ chosen place, in a special place?
- Who designed the place? What traditions or guidelines, both practical ~~and~~ symbolic, were followed in building it?

- How are the areas outside the ritual space regarded? Are they profane, neutral or potentially sacred?

■ Ritual objects

- What, and how many, objects are associated with the rite? What are their physical dimensions, shape, weight and color?
- Of what materials are they made? Are the making and disposition of the object ritualized?
- What is done with it? What happened to it before and after the ritual?
- Is its power animate or personified?
- Has the object a significant name?

■ Ritual time

- At what time of day does the ritual occur—night, dawn, dusk, midday?
- On what date does the ritual occur? At what season?
- Is it a one-time affair or a recurrent one?
- Are ancestors experienced as present during the rite?
- Was there a past or mythical time that is a model for the present enactment?

■ Ritual sound and language

- Does the rite employ nonlinguistic sounds such as animal calls, shouting or moaning?
- Are words ever used causally or magically?
- How important is language to the performance of the rite?

■ Ritual action

- What kinds of actions are performed as part of the rite, for example, sitting, bowing, dancing, lighting fires, touching, avoiding, gazing, walking?
- In what order do they occur?
- What are the central gestures?
- What actions are regarded as especially meaningful and therefore symbolic?

Appendix 3—Selected concepts

1. ^{みこし}神輿：神幸の際に用いられる輿で、神霊を奉ずる祭具。神が人格化されるにしたがい、貴族が輿に乗ることと同様に神の乗る輿が神輿とされた。
sacred portable shrine



ほうれん やかた ほうおう
鳳輩（屋形に金銅の鳳凰をつけた輿）

だし
2. 山車：祭礼にあたり、種々の飾り物による風流をこらし、曳いたり担いだりして

練る屋台の総称。その名称は山車、ダンジリ（檀尻・地車・楽車）、太鼓台、鉾、

山、山笠、曳山、屋台など地方により多様である。「だし」という言葉は、屋台な
とから飾り物を高く揚げる「山だし」からきたと推測される。

(parade) float



ごへい へいそく
3. 御幣（幣束・ミテグラ）：多くは白の和紙、時には金、銀、五色の紙を細工し竹

や木の幣串に挟んだもので、神霊が憑依する神体としたり、神前に供えたり、罪・
械れを祓う用具としたりする。



4. 御神体：神霊が寄り付いて宿ると信じられている聖なる物体のことで、多くは礼

拝の対象となっている。御体ぎょたい・御形みかた・御霊代みたましろ・御正体みしょうたい・霊体などともいう。社殿

が造立ぞうりゆう（寺・社・塔などを建設すること）される以前は、山・岩・石・樹木などを神体として崇拝した。例えば、神体山と称す山は現在も各地に見られる。

5. 依代よりしろ：神が降臨するために目印となるもの。折口信夫おりぐちしのぶの設定した語。

6. 神緋ひもろぎ：神事が行われるあたり、祭場の中心に設けられる臨時的な神霊奉斎ほうさいの施設。

今日では、四方に竹などの柱をたてて注連縄で巡らした中央に、紙垂しでを付したさかき 櫛

を神緋として設置し、その前に神館しんせん（神に供える飲食物。稲・米酒ちようじゆう 鳥 獣・魚介ぎょかい

野菜・塩・水など）を供え、降神こうしん・昇神しょうしんの作法を伴う祭儀形式がとられている。



7. 磐座いわくら：神を迎え、まつるために設けられた石。8.

儀式：ritual, ceremony

くじ しんじ ぶつじ けいちょう
公事・神事・仏事または慶弔の礼などに際し、一定の規則に従って行う作法。

9. 儀礼 : ritual, custom

社会的習慣として、形式を整えて行う礼儀。

のりと じんぎ
10. 祝詞 : 神祇 (天つ神と国つ神。神々) をまつり、神祇に祈ったりする際に神前で
唱える古体の文章。

にいなめさい はつほ
11. 新嘗祭 : 収穫を祝い初穂など神に供えて感謝する意義をもって行われ、また奉仕
者・参加者も共食する祭儀。現在、宮中や神社などにおいて十一月二十〇日に行
われている。

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