Shinto Festivals and Bricolage

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My glasses have crosshairs, like a camera. In the horizontal plane, I see the flow of history and a changing society. In the vertical, I see the shifting tide of religious tradition. At the intersection lies my subject: Japanese religions and society. As a graduate student, my syllabi were top-heavy with Wittgenstein, so I am under no illusion that my vision is anything but partial and fragmentary. We also read mountains of Lévi-Strauss, and the bricoleur is still with me (I don’t mind how bowdlerized the idea has become). I see bricoleurs at work fashioning a way of life out of a powerful experience, or struggling to wring a message from a founder’s revelations that will speak to contemporary problems. Brick by brick, people labor to grasp their religious heritage and forge tools from it to deal with life’s dilemmas. Religion is about this kind of labor: people sensing discord, feeling the way forward, building something by trial and error, and working to align it with contemporary issues. To study religion in this way requires enduring relationships that enable me to see how things will turn out. An example may clarify.

I have been working on Shinto shrine festivals since the late 1990s, especially the Darkness Festival (Kurayami Matsuri) of the Ōkunitama Shrine in Fuchū City in Western Tokyo Prefecture. During the early modern era, it was the best-endowed shrine in the province. More recently, urban sprawl has turned Fuchū into a suburb of Tokyo, and most current residents migrated to Fuchū after 1945; thus, newcomers now far outnumber the shrine’s old-time supporters.

The Darkness Festival is a protean spectacle, a complex of ceremonies and displays unfolding annually from April 30 to May 6. The festival begins on a boat in Tokyo Bay, from which participants draw seawater; it continues with the polishing of mirrors symbolizing the Kami (deities) of the shrine, a procession of gaily caparisoned horses making symbolic offerings to the imperial court, more horses galloping through a tree-lined arcade in town at night, and many other displays of music, dance, and feats of strength. It culminates in a great procession on May 5.

The festival’s purpose is to effect the rebirth of the Kami. The Kami are carried in darkness (to look upon them would be blinding) in eight palanquins called mikoshi, in a procession involving hundreds of bearers and attendants, back to the tabisho. Marking where the Kami first manifested, the tabisho is a large, fenced, vermilion enclosure at a crossroads several hundred meters from the shrine’s main gate. Dozens of men pull huge drums, each large enough for several people to stand on, to clear the way for the mikoshi. The mikoshi each weigh more than one ton, and are carried on long poles atop the bearers’ shoulders. Each bearer thinks the direction he or she is facing is “front,” so the mikoshi whirls in the shrine yard in repeated assaults on the narrow gate through which it must pass to join the procession. Drums await the mikoshi on the other side, calling them with incessant booms. The erotic symbolism is liberally fuelled with alcohol, heat, noise, and the bearers’ calls of Hoissa! Hoissa!

Under fresh-cut bamboo canopies in the tabisho, the Kami receive elaborate offerings of food, music, and prayers of praise. Remaining in this parturition pavilion until morning, they emerge reborn. Their joyous human “children” convey them back to the shrine, where they are solemnly installed to bless and protect Fuchū for another year.

Before the town’s suburbanization, no one publicly disputed the all-night carousing, cross-dressing, brawls, and transgressive sexual encounters that assisted the rebirth of the Kami. But contemporary Japan more conservatively prioritizes school and the workweek, and has limited patience for rowdy shrine festivals and the attendant disruption (especially on a school night). After a string of complaints, the local PTA forced the shrine to adopt a daytime festival schedule in 1962.

The daytime schedule eviscerated the festival’s rationale and made nonsense of its copious use of distinctively shaped decorative lanterns. The costumes and ritual gear, lovingly preserved across generations, presumed a nighttime format; yet they could hardly be abandoned, even if their use made no sense in daylight. Enter the shrine’s high priest Sawatari Masamori, who was appointed in 1999. Determined to restore darkness to the festival, he worked to establish for himself a position of respect and trust in Fuchū, aligning with the mayor and other city officials, and
eventually rising to head the local PTA. By 2002, he had secured the town’s agreement to restore the traditional nighttime format.

Head priest Sawatari’s bricolage utilized the connections and alliances he fostered to insert the shrine into civic life. As a Shinto priest, it was axiomatic to him that the rebirth of the Kami requires darkness, shadow, and mystery. But he also recognized that in the twenty-seven year interval between the institution of a daytime format and his appointment, a generation had grown up thinking that it was normal that the Darkness Festival be conducted in daylight. How to explain the change without undermining that generation’s love for the festival as they knew it? How to persuade Fuchū’s police and fire departments that residents would be safe with a return to darkness? How to convince the city office that Fuchū’s reputation would not be damaged by injuries, deaths, or more-minor mischief at the festival? How to gather allies from disparate groups without disrupting the shrine’s flow of support? How to raise a new generation of festival participants from across town?

I cannot know every detail of Sawatari’s labor, but I can see the results. (Granted, the festival was easier to see and photograph during my first few visits, when it was still being conducted in daytime.) The shrine’s numerous support groups today incorporate a spectrum of attitudes, as do allied civic groups like the chamber of commerce, which benefits from the success of the festival. Many Fuchū residents have participated in the Darkness Festival for decades, far longer than the head priest. But the restored Darkness Festival under Sawatari has become an official “face” of Fuchū, proudly advertised on the town’s website.1 In an era when many shrines are going under for lack of support, head priest Sawatari has reinstated Shinto at the center of a community. I have been lucky to be there to follow the revival.2

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