

Acknowledgments

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About the authors

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Hironori Arakawa is a Japanese anthropologist and folklorist. He currently teaches history, global studies, and international sociology at the National Institute of Technology, Akashi College. He has been interested in Japanese and Asian culture since he was an undergraduate student, and has been doing research on festivals at Kathmandu Valley in Nepal (1998), Shikoku Pilgrimage (1997-2005), and urban areas festivals in Japan (1997-present). He is currently conducting an anthropological survey on the happiness of Bhutan with sociologists and psychologists (The Japan Society for the Promotion of Science bilateral joint seminar 2018-2020). In 1997, he started a survey on the Tōka-Ebisu “Opening of the Gate” Ceremony, his research methods including active

participation: he took part in the ritual race for the “lucky man” eight times. He received his doctoral degree from Osaka University in 2015, and continues to discuss the validity of cultural anthropological methodologies in Education for international understanding (EIU).

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Recent major research themes: a comparative study of myths about water (characteristics of water thoughts in Southeast Asian countries), problems related to the body view of AI (aim to elucidate the relationship between AI and humans, using a viewpoint that discusses the relationship between the "spirits world" and humans from the perspective of traditional performing arts).

Her latest publications: "Relationship between the flood accident in the Philippines and the tradition of mystery" (2018). *Uitemate*. Volume 13, No. 2, "About the Origin of Personification; Seeing the Invisible". Co-author "Evolving *Youkai* Cultural Studies" (2017) Serika Shobo.

Introduction

The present volume is an eclectic collection of papers written by authors of various ethnicities and cultural backgrounds (Italy, Japan, Romania, Thailand) who have, however, similar academic histories and interests, the editor's intention being to create a series of books focused on beliefs, rituals and traditions in the Kansai area - a geographical zone that has often been defined as the "cultural heart" of Japan. As an anthropologist whose main research topic is Japanese *matsuri* (festivals), I am most definitely not implying that Kansai is the only area of high interest when it comes to the study of Japanese ritual practices and ceremonies; I have chosen it for practical purposes as well: it is the area where I am based and have conducted extensive research, whose results might be of use both as ethnographic records, as well as tools for a further analysis of contemporary Japanese society.

The papers in this volume refer to elements related to Shinto, Buddhism, or Oomoto-kyô (a fairly new religion), which might lead the readers to believe that they are mostly connected to religious studies. However, it is not religion and faith that fall under the focus of the present collection, but practices and beliefs of the 21st century that do have an undeniable religious aspect, yet cannot be defined, analyzed

and understood only from the perspective of religion. As Joy Hendry succinctly put it, “Japan has been influenced by a great number of religious traditions”, and “religion pervades many spheres that others might call secular [... so] it is sometimes difficult to draw a line between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’.” (*Understanding Japanese Society*, Routledge 2019: 157) On a similar note, but referring to a more restricted ideological zone, Mr. Tanenori Terai, former *gūji* (high priest) of Osaka Tenmangu Shrine, stated in a lecture from October 20, 2019, that “Shinto is not a religion, but a way of life.” It becomes thus obvious that both the anthropologist and the religious practitioner look beyond the doctrine when analyzing phenomena in Japanese society, and emphasize the fact that certain practices may be rooted in faith and a belief in the supernatural, but are not restricted by belonging to a certain cult, and have become widespread in the lay world.

The present volume refers to ***beliefs, ritual practices,*** and ***celebrations,*** all terms that require precise definitions, but it is not within the scope of this project to provide a unitary description of these concepts. Each author has defined their operating terms according to their direction of research, the most important common element being the fact that all of them wrote their respective chapters based on direct interaction with, and participant observation of the phenomenon discussed. In the chapter “*Neri-kuyō: Ascending to the Paradise with Bodhisattvas,*” Saranya Choochotkaew analyzes a ritual practice unequivocally related to Buddhism,

a ceremony more than one thousand years old which represents a reenactment of an old legend (that of a princess who is taken to paradise during her lifetime due to her piety and good deeds), as well as a way for the believers to catch a glimpse of the Pure Land Paradise during their lifetime by becoming, for a brief hour, vessels for the spirits of Bodhisattvas and other heavenly beings. The ceremony takes place at a temple and is declaredly Buddhist, yet, as the author herself notices, elements pertaining to Japanese indigenous beliefs, such as the idea that the souls of the ancestors dwell on top of mountains, or the presence of the sacred palanquin that carries the spirit of the deity celebrated during the ceremony, define it as an integral part of Japanese culture rather than a mere manifestation of a specific religion.

A similar line of thought appears in Junko Nagahara's chapter, "Reconsideration of the Relationship between Rituals and Noh: the Case of Noh *Seiōbo* in *Oomoto*" - again, the analysis is focused on a specific cult, one stemming from Shinto this time, yet religious syncretism is markedly there. Just like *Neri-kuyō*, the Noh play *Seiōbo* offers the practitioner the possibility of transcending the human world and catching a glimpse of divinity. Both rituals are, at the same time, the promise of salvation on both realms, and a re-interpretation of the universal belief that by putting on a mask, the performer allows his or her body to become a medium, a way for the divine to descend and express itself in human form.

Andrea De Antoni's paper "Ghost in Translation. Non-Human Actors, Relationality, and Haunted Places in

Contemporary Kyoto” is less closely related to a certain doctrine, and more of an ethnographic analysis supported by a comprehensive theoretical framework on the evolution of new beliefs in ghosts and haunted places in contemporary Kyoto. It is a paper based not only a two-year long field work experience, but also on historical research on the origin and development of such beliefs in Japanese culture. The analysis focuses on the concept of “translation”, a process through which human and non-human agents are involved in complex networks of events and phenomena, eventually leading to the establishment of haunted places. The author discusses two specific cases, but his conclusions are relevant at a much larger scale, one that can help understand the belief in ghosts in Japan, a cultural characteristic that has ancient roots and which continues to evolve in and adapt to contemporary society.

The remaining two chapters, “The Invention of the Tōka-Ebisu “Opening of the Gate” Ceremony and the “Lucky Man” at Nishinomiya Shinto Shrine”, and “Uchimashō - Fieldnotes on Tenjin Matsuri” are bona fide ethnographies focused on two of the most important *matsuri* in present-day Kansai: Tōka Ebisu (the Tenth-Day Ebisu, a festival for the God Ebisu, protector of fishermen and merchants and one of the most celebrated deities in the area), and Tenjin Matsuri, one of the three great festivals of Japan. Hironori Arakawa offers a detailed history of what has already become a tradition in Kansai now, one associated with the religious practice of worshipping the god Ebisu as a protector of commerce and businessmen: the *ichiban-fuku* race at

Nishinomiya Shrine. This chapter offers an insight into the process of turning social practices, heavily influenced by economic developments such as the establishment of new transportation routes, into ritual ones. More than an analysis of a religious phenomenon, this chapter emphasizes the highly important role played by such ritual practices in Japanese society, being at the same time an accurate reflection on the changes undergone by seemingly immutable rituals over the span of a mere century.

While my own period of research has not been as long as Dr. Arakawa's, the "Fieldnotes on Tenjin Matsuri" are based on extensive fieldwork, and represent one the few (if not the only one) such papers written in a European language. Since this particular topic is still a work in progress for me, I have only provided a description of the *matsuri*, with a few details regarding its origins and history, and hope to complete a more in-depth analysis in the near future.

As I mentioned in the beginning, this is not a comprehensive work on ritual practices in Kansai, but a collection of papers that, through the efforts of the authors, who have all had direct contact with the subject of their research, most of them having conducted extensive fieldwork, aim to offer some new insights into the culture of Japan. A culture whose quintessence, as Professor Shunsuke Okunishi stated, is defined by its foundation of beliefs, rituals, and ritual practices.

The Invention of the Tōka-Ebisu “Opening of the Gate” Ceremony and the “Lucky Man” at Nishinomiya Shinto Shrine

Hironori ARAKAWA

Introduction

Every year on January 10th, the main gate (commonly called the “Great Red Gate”) at Nishinomiya Shrine in Nishinomiya City, Hyogo Prefecture, is opened at 6 a.m. for visitors to proceed to the main shrine. This event is known as the Tōka-Ebisu “Opening of the Gate” Ceremony. The first three people to arrive at the main shrine are designated as *fuku-otoko* (lucky men).

More than 5,000 people participated in this ceremony in 2020¹. Media coverage of the event has increased from year to year, with not just local Kansai-area media, but also the national television networks and, in 2008, even the international news organization filing reports globally.

¹ *Asahi shinbun*, evening Hanshin edition, January 10, 2020 (<https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASN197QK6N19PIHB037.html> accessed 2020/03/01).