

## Foreword

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Made up of five distinct papers, this is not a unitary volume. With the exception of Chapter 2, all the other papers were previously published, the versions included here having been revised and (hopefully) improved. What they have in common is the focus on *matsuri* - Japanese festivals - and their role in contemporary Japanese society, as well as the connection with the local communities. The *matsuri* described in the first four chapters are mostly concerned with the indigenous set of beliefs currently known as Shinto; even in the cases where various ceremonies are performed at Buddhist temples, the influence of older beliefs is apparent. The last chapter is exclusively about a Buddhist set of practices, but it is connected to the others through the role the ascetic practices play in the community created around the temple, and the way daily, ordinary life is organized around extra-ordinary events and aspects that establish a relationship between our logical, reason and science-based life, and elements that are (or believed to be) beyond human grasp.

My love affair with *matsuri* began when I was writing my master's thesis, on Japanese myths; as happy as I was to live in the world of gods and goddesses, it was even better to discover that they were still present in our society, resurrected for a few days a year in the company of humans. A fortunate coincidence, the first *matsuri* I ever attended (without understanding much about it) was Tenjin Matsuri (discussed in Chapter 2), which has remained my favorite, a longing from afar, because I could not even dream of being able to do research at such a famous place. I have been traveling around Japan since 2005, attending various *matsuri*, many of which are described in the present volume. While by no means an exhaustive analysis, the chapters in this volume are an attempt first at preserving some data about ceremonies and events I consider extremely precious for the history of humankind, and second, at shedding some light on the role rituals play in life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Religion and personal faith aside, rituals are vital for our existences, just as the company of other humans is, and they provide (in a way similar to the need for monumental architecture) group cohesion and purpose. The Japanese *matsuri* are supported by communities, and in turn, they create communities.

As a European living in Japan, I am well aware of my limbo existence: I am no longer one hundred per cent Romanian, but I will never be Japanese either. I make mistakes in both cultures, and I am forgiven in both because the set of expectations a regular member of society must fulfill do not apply to outsiders. That can be an advantage

from the anthropologist's perspective, as it helps me be more objective, analyze the subject(s) of my research with more detachment, but at the same time, it can also create a feeling of loss. Nevertheless, whatever may have been lost by living in two countries has been more than compensated by the discoveries made during my journey: masked dancers weaving their way on the stage all through the night, wild boars sacrificed to the gods, their meat eaten almost raw by the side of the river, straw dragons slayed at midnight, men bathing in frozen rivers and standing on burning fires, going down steep slopes on tree trunks, or carrying extravagantly decorated parade floats for three days in a row, long-nosed demons who awaited to spank the participants with bamboo sticks, laughing gods and ritually weeping babies, huge torches that break the veil between worlds, and fireworks that appease the god of thunder. These past fifteen years have been so rich in experiences that this small volume can include only a small sample, but I hope my selection will offer a useful insight to those interested in this particular aspect of Japanese culture.

I must mention here that these extraordinary experiences and this book itself would not have been possible without the support of some equally extraordinary people, whom I would like to thank here in chronological order (the order they came into my life). Mrs. Gabriella Gheorghiu Baumet, my first English teacher and the person who taught me not only to dream of an academic career outside the borders of my native country, but also to love English and

being a teacher. Unfortunately, she is no longer with us, but I am still using her methods when I teach. Mr. Mircea Dinutz, my literature teacher, who taught me how to express my dreams in writing, and who believed in me from the moment we met. It is my greatest regret that I cannot offer this volume to either Mrs. Baumet or Mr. Dinutz. Ms. Lucreția Gurguță, my French teacher, who has been a wonderful presence during my high-school years and well after that. Prof. Tazuko Sawada, Masaru Tongu, and Takeshige Takehara from Nara University of Education, who represented my first encounter with Japanese academia, and who kindly guided me even after I graduated from their institution. Mr. Masakatsu Hatayama and Mrs. Michiko Hatayama, my Japanese family and the most generous people I have ever met. Prof. Shunsuke Okunishi, my academic advisor, my Professor, who first opened the doors to the world of *matsuri*, and to whom I owe much of my academic career. Prof. Hitoshi Kato, who has been one of my strongest and consistent supporters through the years. Mr. Shogo Kanayama and his family for their support during my research on Nichiren practices. Mrs. Kikuko Sano, a long-time friend and role model. Mr. Takashi Shinki, who introduced me to Saijo Matsuri and who has been driving me to various distant corners of Japan, in search of *matsuri* and sacred places. The Takahashi family from Saijo City, who welcomed me into their home and to their festival. Mrs. Norie Kikuyama, who provided me with an introduction to Osaka Tenmangu Shrine, and Mr. Yoshihiko Higashi, thanks to whom my research on Tenjin Matsuri started in earnest. Mr. Taneharu

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