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**Elisabetta Porcu and Michael Dylan Foster (ed.), *Matsuri and Religion: Complexity, Con-tinuity, and Creativity in Japanese Festivals*. Leiden: Brill, 2021, 332 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-46652-4, €74 (pbk)**

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*Matsuri and Religion: Complexity, Continuity, and Creativity in Japanese Festivals*, edited by Elisabetta Porcu and Michael Dylan Foster, is a rich new volume on *matsuri*, Japanese festivals. The ten chapters were originally published in 2020 as a special issue of the *Journal of Religion in Japan* and have been repackaged in book format.

Porcu and Foster's introduction leads the reader through the broader themes of the volume as well as their theoretical and methodological underpinnings. They imagine the volume as a “multi-sited ethnographic, historical, and theoretical study” (1) that crosses disciplinary boundaries. They, along with their fellow contributors in the nine main chapters of the volume, focus on three major themes—complexity, continuity, and creativity. To briefly offer an overview of how they engage with and define these terms, they examine *complexity* not only of the structure of festivals but also of symbolism, sociality and interaction, and historical interpretation. They highlight the imagined (or desired) historical *continuity* of festivals—both with the past iterations of the festival and with future generations' performances. Finally, they think of *creativity* as being entwined with *continuity*, as communities adapt festivals in the face of demographic, social, and economic shifts. Foster and Porcu start from the premise that *matsuri* “are intrinsic to religious, social, cultural, touristic and recreational life in Japan” (1), but also that *matsuri* are “social and historical phenomena” that are “neither static nor immutable” (2). They argue that “*matsuri* play significant roles in the lives of individuals and communities and often serve as both markers and makers of identity” (2).

In Chapter 2, Tsukahara Shinji considers the float decorations of the Sawara Grand Festival in Chiba. He traces the origins of the current decorations—most of which date to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—noting that while these figures are grounded in prewar nationalism, as they are drawn heavily from emperors, mythological ancestors, and historical figures, they were freely chosen by the people of Sawara due to their contemporaneous popularity. He then brings the reader into the present, pointing out that these same figures are now “bleached” of their earlier associations, seen mainly as the “cute” and “cool” mascots of the various wards that sponsor the floats. One important intervention Tsukahara makes in this chapter is noting the ways

in which anthropologists and folklorists tend to overlook durable artifacts produced on commission by professionals due to a tendency to emphasize the creators' intentions, rather than the emotions and actions that these artifacts inspire in the people viewing and using them. As he observes, these figures were created more than a century ago, yet people's understanding of them has not remained static.

In Chapter 3, Elisabetta Porcu reflects on Gion Matsuri as a "contested zone" by exploring multiple layers of the festival and the interactions between different societal actors, such as neighborhood communities that sponsor floats, the local government, businesses, the tourism industry, and the economy. Through her ethnographic work, she focuses on the struggle between different actors around the reinstatement of the "*ato matsuri*" in 2014 and the negotiation between religious and secular boundaries. In particular, the debate over the reinstatement of the *ato matsuri* was between those who saw it as a ploy to restructure the festival for the sake of tourists and those who saw it as a "return" to the "original" version of the festival—and saw tourism and faith as "integrated rather than conflicting forces" (70). Porcu's chapter offers a fascinating case study in conflicting local interpretations of and motivations for *matsuri*.

In Chapter 4, John Breen explores the Sannō Festival. While Hiyoshi Shrine (and some previous scholarship) presents the festival as ancient and immutable, Breen argues that the festival in its current form is a product of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This chapter, perhaps more than any other in the volume, is interested in debunking myths of unbroken transmission, carefully piecing together all the different texts of the festival to chart the ways that the festival—and even the identities of the enshrined deities—have shifted over time, as well as the historical context for each of these shifts.

In Chapter 5, Michael Dylan Foster introduces the reader to the Namahage of Akita Prefecture in three different guises—as a "private" ritual performed by and within a small community, as a "public" performance at a shrine festival, and as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity item. In particular, he explores the ways that "religion" is articulated in each of these iterations of the "same" tradition and how that concept of religion is tied to concepts of community and intended audience. He coins the term "*brönirism*" to conceptualize notions of change and deviation within different iterations of the "same" tradition, focusing not on the "authenticity" of the iteration but on the meanings and intended audience of each iteration. Foster suggests that "with the different iterations of Namahage, we are actually witnessing not loss, but rather a sort of generation or proliferation of new forms, or at least new contexts in which old forms can mutate, expand, and evolve" (155).

In Chapter 6, Scott Schnell considers the rituals performed around bear hunts by the *matagi*, a specific group of hunters known for their intimate understanding of and relationship to mountainous areas. He highlights the way that *matagi*'s identities are defined by their (both physical and metaphorical) boundary crossing, which leads them

to occupy roles as mediators between the domesticated human and untamed natural/spiritual realms. Schnell argues that the rituals the *matagi* perform “both reflect and encourage reciprocal relationship with other species, and the recognition of one’s own place within an interdependent network” (166), but also legitimize their activities. Schnell’s work on the often-overlooked *matagi* is ground-breaking, and his careful attention to the way that demographic shifts are impacting the *matagi* and their rituals is especially deft.

In Chapter 7, Yagi Tōru analyzes year-end rituals that are unique to the Kyoto area, arguing that they tend to focus on purification of the participants and prayer for good fortune and good harvest in the coming year. This chapter is somewhat of a departure from the rest of the volume (discussed in more depth below) in that Yagi is primarily interested in “age-old regional beliefs” and focuses on the “folkloric significance of the events themselves and what this reveals about the underlying beliefs of the participants” (196). Much of the chapter is devoted to interpreting the symbolism and timing of various festivals, drawing both from historical documents and ethnographic fieldwork, although Yagi does note some differences in how the rituals may be interpreted in the contemporary world.

In Chapter 8, Andrea Giolai examines the Kasuga Wakamiya Onmatsuri, countering the narratives of a festival largely unchanged since time immemorial. Giolai instead approaches the “fractal” features of the festival to examine the dissonances and inconsistencies—such as the erasure of Buddhist institutions and influences in the contemporary narrative of the festival’s founding—that appear in linear narratives of the Onmatsuri. He uses the metaphor of the fractal to visualize the complex interplay between the constituent “parts” of the festival and the whole, arguing that “access to any of these aspects simultaneously provides access to the large-scale dimension of the entire matsuri” (225), creating “the feeling of being part of an event (the *whole*) contained in the space of a single moment (a *part* of that whole)” (240–241). He argues that the longevity and ritual efficacy of the festival hinge upon the generation and circulation of “atmospheres of the past,” referring to “the felt evocation of complex systems of feelings enabled by ‘ostensive signs’ such as the costumes in a parade, the music performed, or the ritual symbols displayed” (238).

In Chapter 9, Susanne Klein focuses on how demographic change has affected two different ritual performance groups in Niigata Prefecture. Klein illustrates the way that these groups are torn between a desire to faithfully transmit the practices that they identify as being unchanging since time immemorial and the pragmatic need to cope with a declining and greying population. Klein skillfully and empathetically engages with her participants’ claims that their tradition is unchanging even as she teases out the changes that have occurred, sometimes because of conscious decisions by the caretakers of those traditions. Ultimately, she positions the groups as intending to both reproduce

the past and connect that past to the future through transmission of their practice to the next generation.

The final chapter is a photographic essay by Ogano Minoru, a professional photographer (mainly of trains) who has a passion for photographing festivals. His photographic essay is accompanied by an introduction by his friend and collaborator, Michael Dylan Foster, who introduces the reader to both Ogano and his work.

As a whole, the volume feels tightly knit, with most of the pieces in conversation with each other. The volume is also beautifully put together and it includes color photographs, which vibrantly depict the festivals being discussed. Unfortunately, the color photographs put the price of the paperback at a hair-raising \$84, far out of the price range of many readers.

For those readers who might be geared toward teaching, Porcu and Foster's chapters might be particularly generative for a lesson about touristic consumption (and community marketing) of religious traditions, while Schnell and Klein's chapters could open some compelling conversations about demographic shifts in rural areas and community-transmission of religious practices. Tsukahara's chapter would also teach well in a class on religion and nationalism in Japan, given his approach to the "bleaching" of nationalistic figures into "cute" mascots. Additionally, Foster's *brönirism* is an especially helpful conceptual framework for thinking about change within rituals and practices without labeling that change as necessarily a "degradation" of the "original" practice.

One commendable aspect of this volume is the engagement with and translation of Japanese scholarship. Notably, one of the chapters (Yagi) is a translation of a portion of a previously published Japanese monograph, one chapter (Tsukahara) was written for the volume but translated from Japanese, and the final photographic essay (Foster and Ogano) is co-written/translated by Foster. Ogano's work, especially, provides an alternative viewpoint on *matsuri* that would be likely overlooked in many other academic volumes.

Unfortunately, one minor point I must raise is that the Yagi chapter feels slightly out of step with the rest of the volume—perhaps as it is the only piece not written for the volume specifically, but in large part due to its approach. While the other pieces are careful to track historical change in *matsuri*, Yagi's piece draws on historical material mainly to explain contemporary practices. Perhaps these practices and their meanings have remained largely static over hundreds of years, but this approach stands out in a volume that otherwise devotes a large amount of page space to proving that *matsuri* are constantly changing and evolving. However, this is a minor point, and is more than outweighed by the increased accessibility of Yagi's work for non-Japanese-speaking audiences.

On the whole, this is an excellent, tightly-knit volume that provides a wide range

of case studies of continuity and change in *matsuri* and will serve both teachers and researchers of Japanese religion well.