
Various Seaside Festivals Bring Vibrant Colors to the Japanese Summer:

A Historical and Cultural Perspective

Japan is a maritime nation, surrounded on all sides by the sea. Among the summer festivals held throughout Japan, many take place at the sea or by the seashore. We asked ANAMI Toru, Specially Appointed Professor at the College of Sociology, Edogawa University, who specializes in folklore and cultural anthropology, about the unique characteristics and origins of summer festivals.

In Japan, summer is a time of numerous festivals and events. How do they relate to the history and culture of Japan?

Extremely hot and humid, the Japanese summer is a very uncomfortable season. Summer festivals are, first and foremost, closely related to these climatic characteristics, as they form a specific background for the creation of culture. Looking back at the history of festivals in Japan, summer was a time when infectious diseases tended to spread, and festivals were held all over the country to pray to ward off such diseases¹. Two famous

festivals representative of Japan, the Gion Festival at Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto and the Tenjin Festival at



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Osaka Tenmangu Shrine, originated as rituals to ward off epidemics. The Owari Tsushima Tenno Festival at Tsushima Shrine in Tsushima City, Aichi Prefecture, is another famous example of such traditions. Originally centered around a procession of *mikoshi*² (portable shrines) carried in the hope of driving away epidemics, these festivals attracted large crowds of spectators, added a variety of elaborately decorated floats called *yama*, *hoko*, and *yatai*³, and gradually evolved into large-scale festivities. Another popular seaside event is the Abare Festival (literally “Rampage Festival”) held at

Ushitsu Yasaka Shrine in Noto Town, Ishikawa Prefecture. It is one of the so-called “valiant” festivals⁴, in which more than two dozen *kiriko* (tall paper lanterns) are paraded, large torches are erected, and portable shrines are thrown into the sea, rivers, and fires, or smashed into the ground.

Instead of parading portable shrines, some festi-



Ohara Hadaka Festival held in Isumi City, Chiba Prefecture. Participants carry *mikoshi* into the sea.



The Abare Festival held at Ushitsu Yasaka Shrine in Noto Town, Ishikawa Prefecture



Photo: Aomori Tourism and Convention Association

The Nebuta Festival of Aomori City is held every year from August 2 to 7. Large lantern floats are paraded through Aomori City.



vals held to ward off epidemics involve floating the dolls representing the plague-bringing deities into rivers or the sea.

Another type of summer festival in a seaside region is the Nebuta Festival in Aomori City, Aomori Prefecture. It is famous both in Japan and overseas. Experts believe that Nebuta originated from the *nemuri nagashi* ritual of exorcising drowsiness (also called “the sleep demons”). I think the reason for such exorcism rituals was the belief that the sleep demons or drowsiness interfered with midsummer agricultural work. Similar festivals, albeit with different names, still exist on the Sea of Japan coast in eastern Japan, in Noshiro City, Akita Prefecture, and Kurobe City, Toyama Prefecture. Maritime transportation had been well developed in the Sea of Japan coastal regions of the country since ancient times, which probably contributed to the spread of a similar culture. The Nebuta Festival, which now features large lanterns paraded through Aomori City (see photo), was originally a ritual held to ward off the sleep demons or drowsiness by lighting small lanterns and floating them downriver and into the sea. However, as the ritual became more of an event and people began to compete over the size and design of the lanterns, they grew into giant lantern floats.

In addition to such festivals, which were originally intended to ward off the spread of summer-specific diseases and drowsiness, during this season the Japanese also do the events of Obon. It is a Japanese custom that combines the ancient Japanese belief in ancestral spirits and the Buddhist-derived event “Urabon-e,” in which the souls of deceased ancestors periodically return to this world and are sent back again toward their world, and the summer period when this tradition is practiced is called Obon. Its timing varies from region to region, but generally it is observed in mid-July or mid-August. There are some summer festivals and events that take place during the Obon period. For example, Miyazu City in Kyoto Prefecture, which is located on the coast of the Sea of Japan, holds a *toro⁵ nagashi* (lantern floating) ceremony to send the souls of ancestors back to the other side of the sea. The Nebuta Festival in Aomori, which I mentioned earlier, may be similar to this ceremony, because on the last day of the festival, a few selected large lanterns are placed on a boat and floated through the harbor of Aomori.

Thus, experts believe that the fusion of summer seasonal characteristics with ceremonies to ward off illness, the sleep demons or drowsiness, and other threats to daily life, and rituals rooted in folk beliefs

such as Obon, which honors the spirits of ancestors, may have led to the custom of people gathering together in the form of summer festivals.

From the perspective of their relationship to history and culture, what are some of the characteristics of festivals and events held at the sea or by the seashore?

In coastal areas with a thriving fishing industry, there are many festivals to pray for a good catch, although these festivals are not necessarily held in the summer. In many places, there are ceremonies where people carry the portable shrines into the sea or take them on boats across the sea. The Kifune Festival, held on Sukumo Island in Yamaguchi Prefecture, is a summer festival influenced by both prayers for successful fishing and *misogi*, a traditional practice of ritual purification in which Shinto priests wash their entire body to remove defilement. Festivals are also common along the coastal areas of Chiba and Kanagawa prefectures near Tokyo. The Hadaka Festival (literally “Naked Festival”) in Ohara, Isumi City, Chiba Prefecture, and the Hamaori Festival (also known as the “Dawn Festival”) in Chigasaki City, Kanagawa Prefecture, are major summer events. The climax of these festivals is the truly magnificent spectacle of more than a dozen



The Hamaori Festival in Chigasaki City

portable shrines in Ohara and about 30 in Chigasaki coming together and crossing them in the sea. These festivals attract large numbers of tourists.

However, I think there are also events where people carry portable shrines into the sea not to pray for a prosperous fishing industry or a big catch, but simply as a purification ritual. When the *mikoshi* is plunged into the sea, the deity also enters the water, and the lively gathering of many people on the beach to experience the divine power of the deity firsthand is in itself a joyful and exciting event. It is also great fun to see many portable shrines from other towns gather,



The Awa Odori of Tokushima Prefecture is a Japanese festival that is well known even overseas.

with participants competing to see who can carry the *mikoshi* with more flair, lift them higher, or decorate them better. From ancient times to present day, festivals have always been not only serious, but also enjoyable events. That is perhaps why they have taken root in the community and have been preserved to this day.

In Japan, there are many festivals and events that have been passed down from generation to generation since ancient times. Has there been any change in the way these festivals are conducted between the past and the present?


One significant change between past and present is the way festivals have become increasingly tourist-oriented. Organizers strive to make it easier for tourists to enjoy festivals in a comfortable environment by charging for seats or otherwise providing spectator seating. There seems to be a variety of creative approaches. In some places, for example, visitors can enjoy the festivities over a meal. At the Aomori Nebuta Festival, there are even viewing seats that cost 1 million yen per seat. To accommodate these new trends, festivals are held in locations where it is easier to set up spectator seating, or are rescheduled to holidays when it is easier to attract large numbers of people. Such creative approaches to organizing festivals have led to their increasing popularity as tourist attractions in the modern era.

How are Japanese festivals known overseas?

Los Angeles in the United States, for example, has a large Japanese-American population, so I think the Japanese festivals that they present to the general American public can be a useful reference. Some of the most commonly performed events are modeled after Awa Odori⁶ and Yosakoi⁷. Another frequently seen feature is Tanabata decorations. They originate from the Tanabata Festival⁸, which is famous for its beautiful Japanese-style ornaments attached to bamboo grass.

The Aomori Nebuta Festival, which I mentioned earlier, is a typical example of a Japanese festival that is well known not only in the U.S. but around the world.

What summer festivals or events in Japan would you recommend to visitors from overseas?

Shoronagashi (The Spirit Boat Procession), a traditional event held annually on August 15 in Nagasaki City on the island of Kyushu in the southwestern part of the Japanese archipelago, is truly fascinating. On the first Obon after a person's death, the surviving family members take the spirit of the deceased on board an elaborate boat-shaped vehicle and parade it through the streets, setting off firecrackers in a lively, festive manner to send the spirit off in the hope that it will safely reach paradise, the place where souls find peace after death. The ceremony involves a series of events, beginning with lively firecrackers to scare away evil spirits as the procession makes its way to the harbor, and ending with the spirits of the deceased being placed on a boat and taken back to across the ocean. Shoronagashi is a unique ritual that is only held in Nagasaki and the surrounding area, so I would recommend experiencing it firsthand if you have the opportunity to visit Japan during the summer. 



Shoronagashi (The Spirit Boat Procession) in Nagasaki City. The spirits of the deceased are placed on boats (in the center of the photo) and taken back to across the ocean.

1. In an age when the existence of pathogens was unknown, people believed that infectious diseases were caused by vengeful spirits or plague deities, and customs were devised in various parts of the country to ward them off.
2. A sacred vehicle that allows deities to travel outside the shrine
3. A general term for a parade of floats pulled or carried through the streets during festivals. The name and form vary depending on the festival and region.
4. Festivals dedicated to Susanoo-no-mikoto, a valiant and boisterous deity in Japanese mythology. It is believed that the excitement of engaging in rampage during such festivals, when portable shrines carrying the deity are thrown into the sea, rivers, or into fire, and are smashed or destroyed, attracts the deities and thereby brings people closer to them.
5. A traditional Japanese form of illumination in which the flame is enclosed in a wooden frame

6. Traditional Bon dance performed in Tokushima City and other areas of Tokushima Prefecture
7. A dance performed during the Yosakoi Festival in Kochi City, Kochi Prefecture. The performers dance while beating small wooden clappers called *naruko*.
8. A festival that originates from a fusion of various traditions based on an ancient Chinese legend and the legend of Tanabata-tsume (a celestial maiden who weaves clothes for the gods) passed down from generation to generation in Japan, as well as the custom of praying for a rich harvest. Inspired by the legend that Orihime (the heavenly weaver) and Hikoboshi (the heavenly cowherd) meet once a year, people write wishes on strips of paper called *tanzaku* and hang them on bamboo grass on July 7.