

Lecture 8: Safeguarding Activities for the Kasuga Wakamiya On-Matsuri Festival

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Introduction

The Kasuga Wakamiya On-Matsuri Festival is a festival of the Wakamiya Shrine, an auxiliary shrine of the Kasuga Shrine. Commonly referred to as the On-Matsuri Festival, the festival is well known and popular among the people of Nara. The Kasuga Shrine and the sacred mountain Kasugayama and surrounding primeval forest were registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1998 and are highly appraised as tangible cultural properties. Moreover, the numerous annual events that take place here are valuable intangible cultural assets that convey the form of traditional Japanese Shinto festivals. Among these events, the On-Matsuri Festival is famous as a representative festival of Japan, and many spectators from outside the city also come to see the event.

1. History of the On-Matsuri Festival
 - (1) Kasuga Shrine and Kofuku Temple

The Kasuga Shrine is said to have been constructed in 768 and is said to enshrine the guardian deity of Heijokyo (today's Nara), as well as the guardian deity of the Fujiwara clan, a noble family who was very powerful at that time. To the west of the Kasuga Shrine lies the Kofuku Temple, which was the family temple of the Fujiwara clan. The relationship between the family shrine and the family temple of the Fujiwara clan was deep, with the Kasuga Shrine deity also positioned as champion of and existing as one with the Kofuku Temple.

The Kofuku Temple had many manors (estates) in Yamato Province. It was such a powerful temple during the Middle Ages that the temple controlled Yamato Province through the warrior forces that served it. The deep link between Kofuku Temple and Kasuga Shrine is extremely important in considering the history of the On-Matsuri Festival.

The Wakamiya Shrine was constructed in 1135. The enshrined deity of the Wakamiya Shrine is said to be the son of the deity enshrined in the fourth building of the Main Shrine of the Kasuga Shrine, and according to legend the figure of a small snake appears at the shrine. The snake as

well as dragon is interpreted to have the character of the god of water in Japan. During the Chosho period (1132-1140), floods and famine followed one after the other, but with the construction of the Wakamiya Shrine and commencement of the On-Matsuri Festival, these natural disasters are said to have dissipated. Subsequently, the Wakamiya Shrine deity drew the faith of the people of Yamato Province as the god of water and agriculture.

(2) From the Beginning of the On-Matsuri Festival until Modern Times

The On-Matsuri Festival began in 1136 through the active encouragement of the Kofuku Temple. In a manner of speaking, the On-Matsuri Festival was held by Kofuku Temple, and it was the temple that played the central role in organizing and preparing for the festival.

In other words, during the Middle Ages, the On-Matsuri Festival was held by Yamato Province as the festival of the Kofuku Temple, which controlled the province. From historical documents preserved at the Wakamiya Shrine, the important events and main dedicated performing arts in the early days of the festival differ little from those of today.

Entering the modern era (17th century), Kofuku Temple lost its position of control over Yamato Province as well as many of its estates, making it both economically impossible for the temple to continue holding the On-Matsuri Festival independently. In response to this, the Tokugawa Shogunate, which had taken over national administration, endeavored through the Nara magistrate's Office that had been established in Nara to have the wood materials needed for the festival's offerings and otobisho portable shrine, as well as the riders and horses needed for the yabusame horse-riding and arrow-shooting contest provided through allocations from throughout Yamato Province. The shogunate also ordered the local Nara residents to prepare the lodgings for those participating in the festival and to provide any extra people to help on the day of the festival when numbers were short.

That is to say, the shogunate took the position of holding the On-Matsuri Festival in practical terms while preserving as much as possible the form the festival had taken since the Middle Ages with the Kofuku Temple taking the central role, supporting the festival with the assistance of the whole of Yamato Province.

(3) From Modern Times onward

The greatest threat to the continuation of the On-Matsuri Festival came during the Meiji era. As its new policy on religion, the Meiji government established Shintoism as the state religion, denying the syncretization of Shinto with Buddhism and eradicating Shintoism of all traces of Buddhism. The Meiji government also organized Shinto shrines, creating a modern Shinto shrine system, quite unlike the previous system, which was directly controlled by the national government. With this, the Kofuku Temple temporarily was virtually destroyed, and nearly all of the monks who lived there had to leave, with some becoming Shinto priests at the Kasuga Shrine.

Thus it was that the On-Matsuri Festival, which had been held by the Kofuku Temple, came to be held by the Kasuga Shrine. However, under the government's policy to abolish all events that "existed in name only," all Buddhist elements were eliminated and expenditures were drastically reduced, making it impossible to maintain the festival on its previous scale. It is extremely regrettable that during this period many of the events and related traditions, as well as valuable tools, implements, and equipment were lost. This was a most miserable period for the On-Matsuri Festival.

Since the Kasuga Shrine could not make all the preparations for various festivals alone, local

residents were directly asked and encouraged to cooperate. During this period it was the people of Nara who, together with the Kasuga Shrine, managed somehow to sustain the On-Matsuri Festival so that the festival could continue.

The Kasuga Shrine deity had always been broadly worshipped by the people of Nara. For example, in villages and towns around Nara there were groups, called “Kasuga-ko” who would gather together in the village or town meeting hall at New Year to worship with pictures and images representing the Kasuga deity, such as the Shikamandara-zu and Kasugamandara-zu. Afterwards, all participants would go to the Kasuga Shrine to worship and pray for safety in the year to come, and the miko female attendants of the Kasuga Shrine would dedicate a kagura dance. This practice was widespread. In addition to this everyday Kasuga faith and worship, as mentioned above, all the towns had historically shared in the organizing and staging of the On-Matsuri Festival, and so for the people of Nara the On-Matsuri Festival was an important annual event.

In 1873, a volunteer group, the Wakamiya Sewa-kata (1st Kasuga-ko), was formed. Comprising Nara town leaders and former magistrate’s office officers, the group raised funding for the festival and made all the preparations for the event. Furthermore, in 1878, the 2nd Kasuga-ko, comprising representatives from the villages that had belonged to the Kasuga Shrine’s former domain, confined themselves to the shrine’s daishukusho (dormitory) and performed the various roles that warrior groups had performed in the past. Also, the daishukusho was renovated by the 2nd Kasuga-ko in 1884.

Furthermore, most of the performing arts groups were also facing great difficulties since they were not receiving adequate financial allowances, yet they frequently participated in the festival.

When Nara was given city status in 1898, the city took over from the Sewa-kata in actively supporting the On-Matsuri Festival. The following year, the Wakamiya Saimu-iinkai was formed, with the mayor of Nara, Kichibe Omori, appointed chairperson. The organization’s office was also located within the Nara City office, and at long last, a system was created that enabled the festival to be held under stable conditions. In 1910, the Saimu-iinkai was renamed the Kasuga Hosan-kai.

In 1931, the Kasuga Shrine examined the Owatari Procession order and the festival events to identify any differences between the way the festival was held prior to the Modern era and its current form. It was then decided to make reforms to return the procession as far as possible to its modern-era form, and differentiate all elements added during or after the Meiji era. It can be said that at this point the form of the festival from the Meiji era to the early Showa era was reviewed, and the philosophy of preserving and passing down traditional events was clearly manifested. However, it was impossible to revive those of the various events that had been held at the Kofuku Temple that had completely disappeared.

In August 1945, Japan was defeated in the Asia-Pacific War, and the country’s systems were subsequently radically reformed. In 1946, Shino shrines became religious corporations and were no longer directly controlled by the national government. Thus, the Kasuga Shrine got off to a new beginning as a religious corporation. With regard to the On-Matsuri Festival, it was decided that it was undesirable for Nara City to organize and stage the festival directly, and so a private organization called the Nara City Cultural Association took over the central role in organizing the event. Later in 1949, when social conditions had settled down, the Hosan-kai was reestablished with the head of the Nara Prefecture Chamber of Commerce as chairperson. The association took over the work that had been done so far, and finally the On-Matsuri Festival

could once again be held under a stable system.

In 1951, Nara Prefecture designated the On-Matsuri Festival as an Intangible Cultural Asset, and in 1953, the festival was designated as a National Intangible Cultural Asset. The On-Matsuri Festival was recognized in this way as a cultural asset that should be preserved and passed down, rather than from the standpoint of protecting cultural assets.

In 1979, the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties was revised and a category for intangible folk cultural assets introduced. Consequently, in the same year the “Performing Arts of the Kasuga Wakamiya On-Matsuri” was designated as a National Significant Intangible Folk Cultural Asset. With this, the On-Matsuri Festival Preservation Association was established, taking over the work that had been previously carried out by the Hosan-kai as well as preservation of the “Performing Arts of the Kasuga Wakamiya On-Matsuri.”

The year 1985 saw the 850th anniversary of the beginning of the On-Matsuri Festival. The On-Matsuri Festival Preservation Association took this opportunity to revive several important events of those disrupted during and after the Meiji era. These included the Nandaimon-Kyomyo-no-Gi ceremony, which had been held by armed priests at the remains of the Kofuku Temple Nandaimon Gate, the Yabusame Sadame (Horse-riding and arrow-shooting contest), and Yutate-Gyoji (Boiling Water Ritual) performed by the shrine’s miko (female attendants). Since then, events and implements have been restored and revived at every opportunity.

From the late 1980s, the event content of the On-Matsuri Festival has been enhanced, but costumes and equipment have been damaged by fire and rain. Each time this has occurred, the On-Matsuri Festival Preservation Association has played a central role in accepting grant-aided projects from the national government to recreate and repair these items, restoration efforts that continue to the present day.

2. Overview and Characteristics of the On-Matsuri Festival

In taking a look at the On-Matsuri Festival of today, I will provide a brief day-by-day overview and summary of the events and characteristics of the festival.

(1) Overview of Events

July 1: Yabusame Sadame (Horse-riding and arrow shooting contest)

The On-Matsuri Festival begins with an event called Yabusame Sadame (the horse-riding and arrow-shooting contest). This event connects the beginnings of the On-Matsuri Festival with the decision to include a horse-riding and arrow-shooting contest that had been dedicated at festivals at the Kofuku Temple up until modern times, and today the ceremony is held on this day at the Kasuga Shrine.

October 1: Nawamune-sai (Sacred Rope Ritual)

Near the grounds of the Kofuku Temple, away from the Wakamiya Shrine, is a place called the Otabisho. Every year during the On-Matsuri Festival, the Wakamiya Shrine deity is transferred to the Otabisho. For this reason, for each festival a kari-goten (temporary residence) for the Wakamiya Shrine deity is built at the Otabisho. The groundbreaking ceremony for this is called the Nawamune-sai (Sacred Rope Ritual) (photograph).

This festival form in which the shrine deity is transferred temporarily for the duration of a festival to a festival location and then returned to the shrine after the festival’s conclusion is believed to have begun in Kyoto during the latter half of the 10th century. The On-Matsuri

Festival is a festival that well conveys this Shinto ritual dating from the Middle Ages. The kari-goten is approximately the same size as the Wakamiya Shrine building where the deity is enshrined, but pine wood is used for the pillars and roof and walls made of earth—a unique construction that draws much attention. When the festival is over, this building is demolished.

December 1: Shozoku-tabari and Shojin-iri Ceremonies

The Kasuga Shrine provides participants in the Owatari Procession with costumes and a sankin-jirei (official letter of participation). The participants are purified at the Wakamiya Shrine, and from this day until the festival live ascetically for the sake of the festival.

December 15: Oshukusho-sai Ceremony

A distance from the Kasuga Shrine in the city area of Nara is a place known as Oshukusho. This is where the Yamato warrior groups that originally participated in the On-Matsuri Festival were housed during the festival and prior to the festival the Yutate-Gyoji ceremony was performed by miko (female shrine attendants) to purify the Oshukusho. Today, based on this tradition, the shukusho-sai ceremony is performed on December 15 to pray for the safe completion of all On-Matsuri Festival events. On the day of the ceremony, the costumes for the Owatari Procession are also displayed (photograph).

December 16: Yoimiya-sai Ceremony

In this zenjitsu-sai (day-before festival) prior to the On-Matsuri Festival, the festival participants, especially groups of children participating in the horse-riding and arrow-shooting contest and dengaku dancers and musicians worship at the Kasuga Shrine. The dengaku dancers and musicians perform in front of the shrine.

December 17: Day of the On-Matsuri Festival

At 12:00am, the ceremony transferring the Wakamiya Shrine deity to the Otabisho, called the “Senko-no-Gi,” is conducted. In total darkness with all lights turned out, a group of Shinto priests carrying sakaki tree branches take the object of worship of the shrine and carry it in a procession to the Otabisho in a secret ceremony. When the Otabisho is reached, the Wakamiya Shrine deity is met at the Kari-no-Goten, and the Akatsuki-sai ceremony is held from around 1:00 a.m. (photograph).

After this, the Owatari Procession begins at 12:00 p.m. In this procession, festival participants and performing arts groups performing in the festival parade towards the Otabisho. The procession departs from Nara Park, which was formerly Kofuku Temple grounds, and winds its way through the central city area towards the Otabisho (photograph). Many people turn out to see this procession and central Nara bustles with one-day sightseers. On the day of the festival, elementary schools and middle schools in Nara City have the afternoon off.

Prior to the procession reaching the Otabisho, the Matsu-no-shita-shiki festival is held at around 1:00 p.m. Near the 1st Tori Gate that serves as the entrance to the Kasuga Shrine grounds is a sacred pine tree called the “Yogo-no-Matsu,” and it is a tradition that as they pass by this tree, each of the performing arts groups presents a part of their performance before continuing on to the Otabisho (photograph). Children sit under the “Yogo-no-Matsu” and watch these performances. This tradition of having children view the performances disappeared during and after the Meiji era but was revived in 2003.

The Otabisho-sai ceremony begins at around 3:00 p.m. and is conducted by Shinto priests (photograph). Following the ceremony, performing arts are presented until 11:00 p.m. This is one of the greatest highlights of the On-Matsuri Festival. These performing arts display in

various forms the roots of Japanese performing arts, and all the arts performed between December 15 and 18 are included in the significant intangible folk cultural asset designation.

The performances begin with Kagura dancing, followed one after the other by Azumaasobi, Dengaku, Seinoo, Sarugaku, and Bugaku. Introducing just a few of these, the Kagura dancing is performed by the miko (female attendants) Kasuga Shrine; Seinoo was performed frequently in the Middle Ages, but today is a rarely seen dance performed at only a handful of events nationwide; and Bugaku is court music and dance that has been passed onto Nara. In the On-Matsuri Festival there are many performances of Bugaku, but this performing art was originally presented in temples during Buddhist services, and so its prevalence is evidence that the Kofuku Temple once took a central role in holding the On-Matsuri Festival (photograph).

In the approach in front of the Otabisho, horse races and a horse-riding and arrow-shooting contest for children are also held.

When the festival is over, the Shinto priests form a procession, as they did in the Senko-no-Gi, and the Wakamiya Shrine deity departs the Otabisho to return to the Wakamiya Shrine before 12:00 p.m. This ceremony is called the “Kanko-no-Gi.”

December 18: Goen-noh

On the day after the festival, a Noh play is performed at the Otabisho in recognition of the efforts of all those involved in the festival. A Sumo wrestling tournament is also held nearby on this day. This concludes the On-Matsuri Festival events.

3. On-Matsuri Festival Organizers and Issues Concerning the Preservation of the On-Matsuri Festival (Efforts and Activities of the People of Nara)

(1) Current On-Matsuri Festival Organizers

Today, the On-Matsuri Festival is organized predominantly by the On-Matsuri Preservation Association, as well as the various performing arts preservation organizations that perform at the Kasuga Shrine.

The Shinto priests of the Kasuga Shrine take the central role in conducting the festival rituals, and together with the On-Matsuri Preservation Association oversee the running of the festival overall.

The performing arts preservation organizations preserve and continue performing arts that have been passed down since before the Meiji era, but the manner in which they do this differs from organization to organization. For example, Sarugaku is performed by a troupe of followers of the Konbaru-ryu school, a Yamato-Sarugaku that descends from a Sarugaku troupe established after the Middle Ages. Bugaku is performed by an incorporated association, the Nantogakusho, which was formed with the objective of preserving and passing down Nara Bugaku. Dengaku and Seinoo are performed at the On-Matsuri Festival by one troupe that comprises mainly one family that has been performing these arts since modern times. During the On-Matsuri Festival, all these groups gather together in a hall to present their performing arts.

(2) The On-Matsuri Preservation Association

The On-Matsuri Preservation Association is a voluntary organization formed after the On-Matsuri Festival’s designation as a National Cultural Asset in 1979. As has been mentioned above, the organization comprises Nara citizens and developed out of the Wakamiya Sewa-kata, which was established by Nara town leaders in the Meiji era. The society’s activities are

overseen by several committees operating under the leadership of the president and vice-president: the General Affairs Committee, which controls finances and general affairs; the 1st Activities Committee, which is responsible for organizing and staging the Owatari Procession and other On-Matsuri Festival events; the 2nd Activities Committee, which is responsible for activities promoting the On-Matsuri Festival in local commercial districts, with the Nara City Commercial District Promotion Association; and the Public Relations Committee, which is responsible for publicity activities as well as the preparation of practical guides. In addition, building and repair related work, such as building of spectator seating for the Matsu-no-shita-shiki ceremony and Otabisho railings are also carried out by the On-Matsuri Preservation Association in conjunction with the Kasuga Shrine.

Committee members comprise businesspeople from the local commercial district or members of the Chamber of Commerce, representatives of performing arts organizations, and Nara City tourism association personnel. The society office is located in the Kasuga Shrine, and shrine priests also participate in meetings.

Currently, the On-Matsuri Preservation Association has approximately 1,000 members, predominantly Nara City residents, and canvasses for new members over a broad area, not only within Nara City. The society carries out its activities with funding obtained from membership fees and contributions from members, as well as prefectural and municipal grants.

(3) Main Activities of the On-Matsuri Preservation Association

On-Matsuri Preservation Association activities are many and varied, but below is a description of the organization's activities that are related to folk cultural assets.

➤ Smooth Staging of the Owatari Procession

Together with Kasuga Shrine, each year the On-Matsuri Preservation Association checks to ensure that the traditional content of the Owatari Procession are being preserved, confirms the number of people in each role and horses participating in the procession, and ascertains whether there are any problems along the procession route. Since the procession passes through the central area of current-day Nara City, not only must the content of the procession be checked, but also discussions held to determine safety measures for spectators, countermeasures for traffic congestion, and notification of and requests for cooperation from the businesspeople in the local commercial district. Where necessary, the relevant organizations are asked to make adjustments and provide cooperation. On the day of the festival, the procession rows are lined up in a predetermined order to ensure the parade departs without a hitch, a task known as "retsu-date." Explanations about the procession rows are also provided to spectators lining the route.

➤ Revival Activities

The revival of events and rituals lost during the confusion of the Meiji era is an issue undertaken jointly by the Kasuga Shrine and On-Matsuri Preservation Association. The 1st Activities Committee considers all proposals for revival/restoration of events, costumes, or implements submitted by the Kasuga Shrine or committee members. As mentioned above, the Yutate-Gyoji ceremony held during the Oshukusho-sai, the rituals performed by Kofuku Temple armed priests at the remains of the Kofuku Temple Nandaimon Gate (photograph), and the horse-riding and arrow-shooting contests have all been revived, as have the furnishings, such as shimadai and haidai pottery used to decorate naorai (after-festival party) and other venues (photograph). In future, the society intends to continue these revival/restoration activities where possible based on careful consideration.

4. Future Issues Concerning the Preservation of the On-Matsuri Festival

An overview of the On-Matsuri Preservation Association has been provided above. Currently the society is encountering no major operational difficulties and is carrying out its activities as an organizer of the On-Matsuri Festival efficiently and effectively. However, the On-Matsuri Festival is not simply an annual festival of a single Shinto shrine but has become established as a major year-end event for Nara. In order for the festival to continue without problems and be enhanced in the future, there are many issues that the On-Matsuri Preservation Association needs to consider. In particular, I would like to mention the issue of countermeasures against rain, which in recent years has become a major issue for the On-Matsuri Preservation Association and Kasuga Shrine.

During the 1996 On-Matsuri Festival, just as the Owatari Procession was underway, there was a sudden downpour of rain, said to have been the first in 50 years, and costumes were badly damaged. All the costumes of the role-players in the parade were authentic traditional items, and so few were made of synthetic materials; moreover, the silk used was very fine and expensive, with some costumes decorated with gold-thread embroidery. These were all severely damaged in the heavy downpour. Thankfully, the damaged costumes were repaired and re-created with grants provided by the national government in fiscal years 1998 and 1999.

In the past, if the weather turned bad around the time of the On-Matsuri Festival, normally snow fell, not rain. If brushed off immediately, snow caused little or no damage to costumes. Now, no doubt as a result of the so-called global warming, in recent years it has become common for sudden downpours of rain to occur.

A particular problem with rain is that the Owatari Procession takes a long time to wind through the city streets, and so the On-Matsuri Preservation Association responded by compiling a manual for staging the procession in rainy weather.

Based on the rainfall forecast issued by the weather bureau prior to the festival, the Owatari Procession could either be cancelled or reduced in scale. On the day of the festival, the directors of the On-Matsuri Preservation Association were to gather at the shrine, recheck the weather forecast, and then make a final decision as to whether or not to proceed with the procession. However, the greatest problem was those cases in which no rain was forecast, yet there was a sudden downpour, such as occurred in 1996. It was therefore decided to set up a number of emergency shelters for use in when it rained. Bus transportation for parade participants to the emergency shelters was also arranged. This would not have been possible without the cooperation of local residents, but the people gave their assistance willingly for their one-and-only On-Matsuri Festival, enabling these preparations to be made.

However, in the past five years, there has not been one occasion on which there was no rain during the festival, with the Owatari Procession unable to be held under adequate conditions in an increasing number of cases. Each year, tens of thousands of people turn out to see the On-Matsuri Festival, especially the Owatari Procession, and so the event is also vitally important from the standpoint of Nara tourism. Thus, calls are being made for a method of enabling the procession to be staged even in rainy weather to be devised.

As a basic principle, the On-Matsuri Preservation Association uses only costumes and implements made with traditional materials and designs. This stance is only natural, considering the history and tradition of the On-Matsuri Festival, including the fact that it has been designated a cultural asset. However, if the procession were to be held even during the rain, rainproof costumes would have to be prepared. This is an issue that concerns the basic philosophy of the Kasuga Shrine and On-Matsuri Preservation Association regarding

On-Matsuri Festival activities; there is also the issue of whether or not the use of such costumes and equipment would be appropriate for an intangible folk cultural asset.

The problems caused by rain are not limited to the Owatari procession. The Otabisho where the festival is held is an outdoor space with a grass-covered earthen stage at the center, and so heavy rain also affects all the events that take place here. Conventionally, one of the temporary buildings constructed around the stage was used in the case of rain. However, this is a very narrow, crowded space, and both ceremonies and events must be abbreviated when such buildings are used. The Kasuga Shrine regards the increasing abbreviation of ceremonies as problematic, and because the shrine desires that the festival be able to sufficiently serve the Wakamiya Shrine deity, since 2003, a temporary roof has been erected experimentally over the stage when rain is forecast. However, this roof takes close to three days to construct and cannot flexibly be put up and taken down depending on the weather. When we think of the numerous performances that take place in the road space in front of the Kari-no-Goten, under a blue sky or sparkling night sky, in the On-Matsuri Festival that has grown familiar to us over many years, the sight of a large structure built in the Otabisho certainly feels strange and unnatural.

The Kasuga Shrine began this experiment with a thorough awareness of not only the tradition of the On-Matsuri Festival, which has continued for more than 850 years, but also of the necessity of taking measures against environmental changes. Whether this is appropriate for the On-Matsuri Festival needs to be determined following careful consideration. These are the major issues for the On-Matsuri Festival that must be addressed in the future.

Conclusion

This concludes my talk about the On-Matsuri Festival. The main points I wished to make are summarized as follows.

(a) The On-Matsuri began at the beginning of the 12th century and is a representative festival of Nara. With the festival's long history, the beginning of the modern era (Meiji era) in particular posed threats to the festival's continuing existence, and the people of Nara worked actively to maintain the festival during this period.

(b) The main characteristic of the On-Matsuri Festival today is that it conveys well the style of the Otabisho ceremony, which is said to have begun in the latter half of the 10th century. The centerpiece of the festival is numeral performing arts dedications. As an event that displays the roots of Japanese performing arts in various forms, the festival has been designated as a significant intangible folk cultural asset.

(c) The main activities of the On-Matsuri Preservation Society are the smooth staging of the Owatari-shiki procession and revival activities. In recent years, rain countermeasures have become a major issue.