From the Centre chair

Summer is lingering on for a little bit in London, after a quite rainy August, giving a warm welcome to the new students. As I write, the Centre is doing the last preparations for our yearly symposium. This year’s theme is on the worship of stars. The programme is included with this issue, and we will have a report on the contributions in the winter issue.

With the beginning of the new academic year we have the usual comings and goings of members and associates to the Centre. Brian Bocking is on a well deserved sabbatical, and will be spending the academic year 2004-5 bringing to completion, with Dr Youxuan Wang, Research Fellow in the Department of the Study of Religions at SOAS, a Leverhulme Trust-funded research project on Madhyamika and Yogacara thought in China. Yukiko Nishimura has come back from her fieldwork, and will update us on her findings in the postgraduate Forum. Carla Tronu Montane has come back from a short fieldwork trip in Italy and Spain, and is preparing to leave for a longer period of study in Japan. We bid farewell to Meri Arichi, 2003-4 postdoctoral fellow, thanking her for her contribution to the Centre activities, and knowing that she will still be in London and able, from time to time, to be involved in SOAS activities. In this newsletter Meri introduces some of the fieldwork she conducted this year in Japan, and will be telling us about her impressions of the year at SOAS in a later issue.

We welcome the new postdoctoral fellow, Dr Katja Triplett, from Marburg University, and Tullio Lobetti, a new PhD candidate, who is the recipient of the 2003 CSJR studentship. Details of their research projects are included in this issue. I wish them a very productive time at SOAS, and look forward to an exciting collaboration. Other PhD students have started this year and we hope to read about their research projects soon. In this issue the dedicated section to introduce postgraduate research in Japanese religions includes a report by Yoshiko Imaizumi, PhD candidate at SOAS.

Last year was a very hectic one for the Centre, with a tight schedule of seminars. Speakers from Britain, Europe and Japan talked about a variety of topics such as the origins of Shinto, the worship of Confucius, samurai spirituality, shinbutsu art, and Buddhist learning, politics and language, all of which gave us the chance to learn more about aspects of Japanese religions throughout history. The Forum, too, witnessed exciting papers from young scholars at SOAS and beyond. This term we look forward to an array of international speakers at the seminar series and SOAS students at the Forum. Among the activities scheduled for this term I would like to highlight the screening of a documentary film on the mountain retreat of the Hagurô Shugendô group. The film will be a rare occasion to learn in depth about this fascinating aspect of Japanese religion, and to discuss it with two specialists in the field who are also practitioners.

From our information section dedicated to events related to Japanese religions I would also like to draw your attention to the announcement of the forthcoming Toshiba lectures organized by the Sainsbury Institute, where Prof. J. Rosenfield will present his research on the monk Chôgen. In this section of the newsletter you may also read the reports of related academic activities that have taken place in Europe, an international symposium in Vienna and a Shinto ritual and workshop in Venice. I am grateful to the students who have contributed these reports. Finally, I am happy to announce that our website is being revamped, and by the end of the month will be online with more information about our activities and on Japanese religions in general.

I wish you all a good beginning of the academic year and I look forward to seeing you at the activities organized by the Centre!

Lucia Dolce
Centre Activities

CSJR Seminars

SOAS, Thornhaugh Street  Russell Square, WC1H 0XG
5.00pm-6.30pm Room G3

7 October
Human Sacrifice in Japanese Legends
Katja Triplett (SOAS)

21 October
Exploring Reasons for Dogen’s Mid-Career Move to Echizen
Steven Heine (Florida International University)

25 November
Religion on Mountains
Michael Pye (University of Marburg)

9 December
Film: Death and Rebirth in the Mountain:
The Ascetic Training of Shugenja Japanese Practitioners
Fumi Ouchi (Miyagi Gakuin/SOAS)
Gaynor Sekimori (Tokyo University)
Venue: Khalili Theatre, 6pm

ALL WELCOME
For further information please contact the convenor
Lucia Dolce (ld16@soas.ac.uk) (020) 7898-4217

Japanese Religions Forum

The Forum, convened once a month in term time, brings together postgraduate students, MA and PhD, working on Japanese religions from all academic departments at SOAS. The Forum aims to encourage a multidisciplinary approach to the study of Japanese religions.
SOAS, Thornhaugh Street Russell Square, WC1H 0XG

Time: 5:00-6.30 pm
Place: Room G3

14 October
Yukiko Nishimura, SOAS
Revisiting the Study of the Cult of Avalokitesvara in Japan.

11 November
Anna Shegoleva, SOAS
Place for Imagination: Ikai Portrayed in the Ghost Stories of Japanese Youth

The Worship of Stars in Japanese Religious Practice

Day 1:
Thursday 16 September

2pm Introduction

2.30pm Keynote Speech The Tokugawa Shoguns and Omnyodo
Hayashi Makoto (Aichi Gakuin University)

3.15pm Tea break

Day 2:
Friday 17 September

Personification of Stars

Chair Tim Barrett

10am Stars and Planets in Chinese and Central Asian Buddhist Art in the Ninth to Fifteenth Centuries
Lilla Russell-Smith (Independent Scholar)

10.45am Coffee break

11.15am Images of Stars and Their Significance in Japanese Esoteric Buddhist Art of the Heian Period
Tsuda Tetsuei (Tokyo Bunkazai Kenkyujo)

12.00pm Discussion and Questions
12.30pm Lunch

Star Rituals in Context

Chair Brian Bocking

2pm Seven Stars of Heaven and Seven Shrines on Earth: Hokuto Shichisei and the Hie-Sanno Cult
Meri Arichi (SOAS)

2.45pm Nikko Shugendo and Star Rituals
Gaynor Sekimori (Tokyo University)

3.30pm Discussion and Questions

4pm Tea break

4.30pm Manipulating the Heavens: The Artificial Skies of the Edo Period
Timon Screech (SOAS)

5.15pm Discussion and Questions

Final remarks
CSJR Seminars: Film Screening
9th December 2004
Khalili Theatre, SOAS, 6pm

Death and Rebirth in the Mountains: The Ascetic Training of Shugenja Practitioners in Japan

Fumi Ouchi

Shugendô is a folk religious tradition unique to Japan. It is based on an ancient faith in mountains, which later came under the influence of Taoism and Buddhism, especially the esoteric Buddhism of the Heian Period. Therefore Shugendô is a combination of different beliefs and, in this sense, typical of the complex and syncretic Japanese religious culture.

Shugendô practices include a variety of activities, from praying for various worldly benefits, to the performing arts, and ascetic training in the mountains.

Ascetic training was organized in the medieval period. Its most important feature was the ritual of mineiri (entering mountains), which consisted of retreating to a sacred mountain for a specific period of time, which ranged from a few weeks to a few months, three or four times a year, depending on the group. This ritual is still held on some mountains, like Ōmine (Kumano, Yoshino), Dewasanzan Gassan, Hagurosan, Yudonosan), Hikosan and so on. Recently it has interested not only scholars, but also common people. In fact today, the participants include not only specialized shugen, that is, people who have received official training as priests (tokudo) or have practiced for a long time, but also people from all sorts of backgrounds and professions who are interested in having a deep religious experience for their own spiritual well-being.

It is the retreat (Akinomine) held at the beginning of autumn at Hagurosan Kotakuji, the head temple of Hagurô Shugendô, which is considered to preserve the most medieval form of the mineiri. The Akinomine is a symbolic death and rebirth ritual, where participants symbolically begin as fetuses, and “grow up” during the course of it. At the same time, the practitioners are experiencing each of the ten realms, which embody the process of attaining Buddhahood (jikkai shugyô), an idea that prevailed in medieval Japan. These two processes, are conveyed to practitioners by visual and aural symbols, or other physical activities, but there is a limit to the extent to which they can be recorded in written form. Even participants do not know the whole contents of the ritual actions, as many take place simultaneously or during preparations attended only by a few senior members.

Because of the inherent esoteric character and gravity appropriate for a religious ritual, although some parts of the activity had been recorded by participants, the whole event had never been recorded on film. In this sense, Death and Rebirth in the Mountains: The Ascetic Training of Shugenja Practitioners in Japan has a tremendous value as a documentary, in that it contributes both to religious studies and the preservation of a valuable heritage.

When in 2003 the Reverend Shimazu Kôkai, the head of Hagurosan shugenhonshû, decided to allow the whole process of the Akinomine to be filmed, it was Mr Kitamura Minao, a documentary film director and film anthropologist, who made this worthwhile endeavor possible. Although he took part in the Akinomine in 2002 and realized the value of it, he never thought of making a film about it because he respected its nature as an ascetic practice. However, when Reverend Shimazu decided that the Akinomine should be recorded on film in order to preserve it correctly, Mr Kitamura was entrusted with this important task. He and his team from Visual Folklore recorded the overall Akinomine, whilst acting as participants in the ritual, and doing their utmost not to disturb it in any way during the filming.

After the first showing in January 2004 in Tokyo, the film was shown in many parts of Japan and earned much acclaim. A shortened version of it was prepared for broadcasting on NHK, and it is this adaptation which we will see at SOAS. This is the first, and might be the only, occasion that this film will be shown outside of Japan.

The film’s running time is approximately 60 minutes. It will be preceded by a short introduction by Dr Gaynor Sekimori of Tokyo University, and also a shugen practitioner, and followed by a question and answer session with the ethnomusicologist Fumi Ouchi (Miyagi Gakuin/SOAS), a senior shugen priest at Hagurosan.
Introducing New Members

Dr Katja Triplett, Holder of the 2004-5 CSJR post-doctoral fellowship

I am delighted to have been given the wonderful opportunity to do research and teaching at SOAS as the CSJR post-doctoral fellow for the academic year of 2004-5. I completed my PhD at Philipps University in Marburg, Germany in the Department of the Study of Religions in 2002, and worked there as a research specialist in a government funded project on the views of fate and life management in contemporary Japan. The three-year project was supervised by Professor Michael Pye, who was also my doctoral advisor, and will culminate in the publication of a book titled Streben nach Glück. Schicksalsdeutung und Lebensgestaltung in japanischen Religionen (Striving for happiness. Destiny and Life Management in Japanese Religions). During the project, I examined concepts of karma and illness in the Tenrikyō religion. This included fieldwork in Japan, and also followed my special interest in the visual aspect of religion, enabling me to prepare a contribution to a book on the use of manga in life guidance by contemporary Japanese Buddhists.

In my MA thesis (1996, published as Prinz Goldglanz auf der Reise durch Himmel und Höllen. Zwei japanische Bildrollen des Bishamon no honji aus dem 16. Jahrhundert im Kölner Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, 2001) as well as in my PhD thesis, Menschenopfer und Selbstopfer in den japanischen Legenden (Human Sacrifice and Self-sacrifice in Japanese Legends), I examined visual presentations in connection with religious narratives because I felt that these image-text combinations such as in “popular” picture scrolls and books had been considered mostly in either one of our neighboring fields: Art History and Literature. Since they are indeed valuable sources for the study of religious life-views and concepts, we can observe that they have finally become the focus of academic work in our field in recent years.

Based on the subject of my PhD thesis about the motif of human sacrifice in Japanese legends throughout the ages and the discourse on the historicity of a cult of ritual human sacrifice, I would like to continue studying how legends and myths are transmitted, the different strategies used in their transmission and the roles they play. In my thesis, I studied the function of legends that contain motifs of forced or voluntary ritual human sacrifice, by looking into the legends most frequently cited in secondary sources that reflect on these legends from various angles. As an example I presented a version of the Matsura Sayohime legend from the 17th century. Matsura Sayohime is a name first found in poems of the eighth century collection Manyōshū and is, in the legend versions I examined, the story of a young heroine saved, by the power of the Lotus Sutra, from becoming a sacrificial offering to a giant serpent, and who ultimately manifests as the deity, Benzaiten. The legend is a typical story of the former human life of a deity (honjimono, engimono), which often features in foundation histories of temples or shrines.

The Sayohime legend praises filial piety and the virtues of Buddhism while telling the origin of two deities of particular temples: Benzaiten of the sacred island Chikubushima, and Kannon of Tsubosaka Temple in Nara. After 1600, the basic set of motifs that make up the plot of the Sayohime legend appears in different genres of literature. Up until the Meiji period it was also transmitted orally and the story plot can still be found in local legends of northeastern Japan today, often connected with a temple of the Medicine Buddha. Whereas this material does not bear any resemblance to the legendary Matsura Sayohime of the Manyōshū, the Manyōshū style legend is still very much alive at several sacred locations and in and around Karatsu (Saga-ken) as I found on a recent field excursion. The legends are propagated here, quite typically, via shrine or temple pamphlets and tourist guides, as well as in the text of explanatory signs commonly found in sacred precincts.

During my year as a fellow, I look forward to continuing research on the role of foundational myths and legends in the maintenance of Japanese tradition. I am especially interested in the media used in their transmission such as illustrated books or the design of sacred places and pilgrimage routes. I will also be revising sections of my PhD thesis and bringing it to publication, as well as organising a CSJR workshop pertaining to this theme.
From Past Fellows

Dr Gaynor Sekimori, Holder of the 2000-1 CSJR Post-doctoral Fellowship

I have been working at the Institute of Oriental Culture at the University of Tokyo since November 2001, after completing my year’s post-doctoral fellowship with the Centre. My job description is two-fold. On one hand I have been overseeing the launch of a new academic journal as Managing Editor. Called the International Journal of Asian Studies, it is published twice a year by Cambridge University Press. The third issue is now in press. Being involved with such a project has been very exciting, involving the initial proposal to the publishers, the contract negotiations between the publisher and the university, choosing the design – colour, layout, font, etc., advertising the Journal among potential contributors and subscribers, and, most importantly, creating a standard and a “personality” for the Journal in the content selection and design for the first few issues. The Journal has a broad interest in topics related to the humanities and the social sciences throughout Asia, and is particularly interested in articles able to provide an historical perspective, and which provide cross-regional comparisons. We particularly want to encourage local scholars to find a voice and join academic debate through publishing their work in English. My time, at least theoretically, is equally divided between the Journal and my own research, which remains focused on Shugendô. I have a number of projects in hand, primarily concerning the history of Hagurô Shugendô. However involvement in conferences, in publishing ventures and other academic work has prevented me from getting as much down on paper as I would like. Being back in Japan has ensured though that I at least have been able to attend the Akinomine at Hagurosan each year for the last three years. I returned last week from there, having reached something of a milestone in that I have completed my seventh retreat; all those who do so receive a yuigesa (surplice with pompoms attached) to mark their continued practice. It was also interesting from a personal point of view in that my fourteen-year-old son took part for the first time.

Last year the Akinomine was filmed in its entirety. Having cameras continually running did not make concentration easy, but the result has been very impressive. It represents perhaps one of the fullest treatments of any ritual practice. It is very exciting that it will be shown at SOAS in December. I have been working on the translation of the script, which also involved translating the sutras and litany used in the twice-nightly recitation. It has been very useful since I have been able to clarify many points about the practice that were obscure, and it also gave me the excuse to travel to Hagurosan and spend long periods of time discussing Shugendô with the Daisendatsu – something normally very difficult, given the demands on his time. I have also been working on an article to contribute to a book concerning Mountain-Entry practices at Hagurosan which will be published later this year. Originally I intended simply to translate an article about the historical development of the Akinomine that I wrote about ten years ago, but inevitably the exercise turned into a full-scale rewrite, involving new material. (Now I want to rewrite it in English!) A third “distraction” is my volunteering to edit and translate in parts a book in English about Shugendô by the foremost Japanese historian of Shugendô, Miyake Hitoshi, to be published in time for the international conference on the history of religions (IAHR) to be held in Tokyo next March. I will be appearing on a panel with Miyake and other Shugendô scholars to discuss the role of Shugendô in Japanese culture; I will analyse how the Meiji kami-buddha separation policies affected the Shugendô centres of Yoshino, Hagurosan and Hikosan in quite different ways. I also plan to present a paper in English about early-Meiji Hagurosan. Thanks to my participation in the Stars conference, I have embarked on a whole new line of research, concerning on one hand the resurgence of Nikko Shugendô and on the other the practice of star rituals, and the Sonjobo in particular. Life is very full at the moment, and orientated almost completely on Shugendô. What more could I ask for?

Dr Gaynor Sekimori will be giving a talk entitled ‘Whose are the mountains. Shugendô and the policy of separation of Shinto and Buddhism 1868-1875’

January 13, 2005
6.00 pm
Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain
60 Queen’s Gardens, London W2 3AF.
Nearest Tube: Bayswater, Lancaster Gate, Paddington.
Non-Fellows welcome but please contact beforehand on info@royalasiaticssociety.org or 02077244741.
The religious practices that may be labelled as “ascetic” are still alive in contemporary Japan, in spite of its well-known image as a modern westernised and completely secularised country. From the practitioner of various religious denominations undertaking strict hardships, to commoners walking on the half-extinguished fire at local fire rituals (gōma), the use of the body as a means of spiritual empowerment still plays an important part in the religious life of Japanese people. Moreover, in recent years the media has drawn a lot of attention to certain aspects of this practice. The NHK program of 1980 on the Kaihōgyō practice of Tendai monks received a great deal of attention, and many books have been written during the same period by the practitioners themselves, or by people who witnessed them. Some of them, like Wazaki Nobuya’s Ajari tanjō. Hieizan sennichi kaihōgyō: Aru gyōja no hansei, are now listed as bestsellers.

Despite this popular interest, the few scholarly works on Japanese asceticism, like those by Hiramatsu Choku about Kaihōgyō or the works of Miyake Hitoshi about Shugendō focus mainly on the practices of a single sect, or mention asceticism as part of a wider discourse. Probably due to the lack of sources even fewer works are available in western languages.

The objective of my research is to conduct a comprehensive overview of the various ascetic practices still alive in contemporary Japan and their ties with the various religious denominations, and to explore their interaction with the social dimension of religion.

Instead of focusing my research on a single practice or sect, I will try to systematize the various practices in order to clarify all of the differences and likenesses among them. I think that a comparative approach is necessary in order to show the doctrinal ties between different schools that lie behind the specific practices. We can see, for instance, how the body purification made by water ablutions is present, with similar modalities, in Shinto, Buddhism, Shugendō and in a variety of popular practices. By not considering a single practice as the exclusive feature of a particular sect, I hope to circumvent the risk of analysing the various traditions as perfectly discriminated and self-contained.

In order to do a preliminary classification I will review existing sources on a variety of practices, and then conduct a focused reading on the various traditions involved. These will be drawn from the pertinent corpora of texts, including the major works of the founders and major disciples, and the relevant sûtras and commentaries. Furthermore,
Fieldwork Reports

Yukiko Nishimura, holder of the 2002-05 CSJR Research Studentship

Worship of Avalokitesvara in Japan

I spent the 2003-2004 academic year in Japan, where I had the opportunity to engage in research on extant images of Kannon (Skr. Avalokitesvara), and also to meet Japanese scholars in interrelated fields.

Among almost 80 extant images of Kannon from the late Hakuho to the Nara period, all exist in Japan. These extant images, their style, iconography, and especially the modifications in them, reveal the changes of religious practices surrounding the images, and the purposes for worshipping the deity.

I made several trips to Nara and Kyoto to examine the images. I was fortunate to have the kind support and supervision of Professor Matsuda Seiichiro, of the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, who specialises in Buddhist sculptures, especially those from the Nara period. I cannot thank him enough for all his kindness, help, and support during my stay in Japan. With Professor Matsuda and his research centre staff and students, I visited museums in Nara, Kyoto and Tokyo, where I was allowed to handle the religious icons. I also participated in his research project on the university’s private collection, which includes Bodhisattva images from the late Hakuho period, and are designated as Important Cultural Property of Japan. I learned a lot from Professor Matsuda about how Japanese scholars research sculptures, from taking photos, measurements and detailed notes, to making databases, and analysing them. Sometimes the process was painstaking, but what I learned enabled me to incorporate the study of images into my research on the worship of Kannon in the Nara period.

Also during my stay in Japan, I had the opportunity to attend conferences on various areas of Japanese studies. It was helpful not only to have had the opportunity to meet Japanese scholars, but also to attend some newly established conferences, and to become a member of the associations sponsoring them, such as Nihon bukkō sogo gakkai and Nihon rekishi bunka gakkai, which aim to review existing academic trends and to stimulate more interdisciplinary exchanges of opinions. I hope to incorporate the knowledge gained into my PhD research, which is an interdisciplinary study of art history, Buddhism, and the history of Japan. I look forward to sharing more about my findings when I present them at the SOAS postgraduate forum in the autumn term.

Carla Tronu Montane, holder of the 2003-06 CSJR Research Studentship

A Sociology of the Christian Mission to Japan

During the first year of my ongoing research on the cultural encounter between Japan and Christianity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I focused on a chapter of my thesis in which I explore the spatial dimension of Christianity during those centuries. I presented part of this work as “Constructing a Place for Christianity in Pre-Modern Japan: A Study of Kirishitan Sacred Space, Body, Religious Practice and Sacred Objects” at the Research Student Colloquium organized by the ARHB Centre of Oriental and African Literatures at SOAS and UCL.

That was one of three presentations I gave during the year, all of which provided me with opportunities to discuss my ideas with other research students, as well as with SOAS lecturers and visiting scholars.

This summer was spent on a research trip to European archives, thanks to the travel fellowship given to me by the CSJR. From 20 June to 1 July, I stayed in Rome, where I carried out research at the historical archive of the Society of Jesus, called Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI), I consulted a manuscript I was looking for, the earliest Obedientias by Valignano, and I explored the rest of the collection, Japonica Sinica. I acquired some background on the literature on Jesuit architecture in Europe and in the American missions, thanks to the advice of Father José Yoldi, archivist at ARSI, and Father Francisco de Borja Medina, researcher at IHSI. I also researched at the historical archive of the Congregazione per l’Evangelizzazione dei Popoli, known as Propaganda Fide, where I consulted the few volumes about Japan. Since the indexes were not updated, the folio numbers did not correspond to those quoted in secondary sources or in the indexes, and no microfilms or digitalisations were available for consultation. This made research quite exhausting, but I was able to find interesting documents on the petition of the establishment of provinces and dioceses in Japan.

While in Rome, I also had the opportunity to visit the Historical Institute of the Society (IHSI) and its library, thanks to the support of Father Francisco de Borja Medina. I was also able to meet Father Jesus Lopez Gay, a Jesuit scholar who has written a lot about the early Japanese mission, and who is, at the moment, Professor Emeritus at the Pontificia Universita Gregoriana (PUG). His letter of
support was crucial for my admittance to the PUG library, and his guidance through it made my research more efficient.

From 4 to 10 July I stayed at the convent of Saint Tomas in Avila, Spain, where the archive of the Dominican missions, called Archivo de la Provincia del Santo Rosario (APSR), is kept. I explored the Japanese collection, which has been recently re-filed and reordered, so that again it was almost impossible to consult the manuscripts following the references given in the secondary sources. I appreciated the support and kindness of the Dominican community in the convent of St Tomas, especially from Father Donato Gonzalez Reviriego.

After that, I went to Valladolid, to consult the archive of the Philippine Augustinians. The Japanese collection is very reduced, since most of the original letters were sent to the Vatican on the occasion of the canonization of the Augustinian martyrs of Japan, and no copies or transcriptions are available. However, thanks to the help of the archivist, Father Carlos Alonso, I managed to consult the Japanese collection and the library, where I could photocopy secondary sources on the Augustinians in Japan.

Until now my research has been mainly based on edited Jesuit sources, and the few manuscripts kept at the British Library. Travelling to Rome and Avila was a great opportunity to explore relevant archives for the Catholic missions in pre-modern Japan. While the stay in Rome allowed me to extend the chronological span of my research on the Jesuit missions, my visits to the Dominican and Augustinian archives gave me the opportunity to expand the range of my research beyond the Jesuits.

My plans for the future are to do research in Japanese archives. Having been awarded a scholarship from the Japanese Government (Mombukagakusho), from October 2004 I will be based at the Osaka University of Foreign Studies for two academic years. During that time I intend to improve my Japanese language skills, and explore Japanese primary and secondary sources.

Research Report

Spatialisation and Ritualisation on November 3rd at Meiji Jingu (1920)

Yoshiko Imaizumi

Meiji Jingu was established in Tokyo in 1920, as one of the major state shrines. It was dedicated to the spirits of Emperor Meiji and his wife, Empress Shoken, after their deaths. After World War II, it was registered as a religious corporation in accordance with the Shinto Directive and Religious Corporation law. Today, this well known shrine is one of the most popular in Japan, and receives more visitors during the first three days of the New Year than any other shrine in the country. My PhD research aims to re-examine the history of Meiji Jingu, and to provide a sound basis for an exploration of the relationship between nation, religion and society through the pre-, inter- and post-war periods.

Here I will outline my understanding of theoretical frameworks, focusing particularly on discussions of the production of time and space, and suggest the significance of performance analysis as part of a time-space construction. I then examine the inaugural performance of the Meiji Jingu rituals, which were held on and around November 3rd 1920 to celebrate the shrine’s establishment. My purpose is to clarify the process(es) through which ritual performances became institutionalized, and to explore the dynamic aspects of the operation and acceptance of those performances.

From a theoretical perspective, the following three points are instructive. Firstly we need to understand, with scholars such as Lefebvre, that space is socially produced. Lefebvre argues that space is not a simple vessel to be filled with its contents, but rather that it is a socially conceptualized product which ‘overlays physical space, making symbolic use of it’. The importance of Lefebvre’s argument is that he draws attention to the difference between conceptualized space and place. The crucial point is that only by seeing space and place as distinct, can we grasp the process by which space is articulated into places. Secondly, if the social production of space is important, it follows that the social production of time is also important. Giddens argues for a two-stage formation process of modern time-space in which pre-modern local time, which previously held sway in a given locale, is disembedded from its origin, and in which time and space are then reordered and recombined by modern social systems through the standardization of time-space measurement. I follow Harvey in examining how the changing meaning of space and time can be integrated into one distinctive time-space.

Thirdly, the purpose of my discussion on Meiji Jingu is to disentangle the dynamics through which one distinctive time-space is appropriated. My concern is to explore how
this time-space was operated, experienced and manipulated from within. Postcolonial thinkers are similarly concerned with the performance dimension in the analyses of the production of nation-space. For example, Bhabha shows how a seemingly horizontal and homogeneous time and space is in reality appropriated by nation-people themselves. Here, De Certeau’s discussion seems to be useful; he re-examines Foucault’s panoptic power production, and discusses the question of ‘what popular procedures manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them’. The crucial point in De Certeau’s work is that this manipulation is not merely a reactive force employed by ‘consumers’ of the space, but is a spatial practice through which ‘spaces are reconverted into spaces’. This insight opens the way for us to see the ever-changing nature of space-place-space dynamics. My concern here is to examine how the apparently static space of Meiji Jingu was socially produced, and to investigate the dynamics of its production. The meanings of the terms Shinto, religion and shrine have been in constant flux along with the changing nature of the nation state. The only unchanging element is the ‘place’ of the shrine. My research begins with this fact, and examines the ways in which events occurring at the place were made, understood and situated in society.

On and around November 3rd 1920, about 1,500,000 people are said to have visited Meiji Jingu for the celebrations of its establishment. I explore three questions in my work: firstly, how November 3rd came to be designated as Meiji Jingu’s festival day; secondly, how and by whom the celebrations were determined; and thirdly, how these newly formulated ways of celebration in the newly constructed space and time were understood by the people of the day. However, due to constraints of space, here I only examine the 2nd and 3rd questions.

In October 1920 the Home Ministry determined the Meiji Jingu establishment rituals and Meiji Jingu annual rituals, both ceremonial in nature. Government officials and Meiji Jingu priests consequently attended these ceremonies on November 1st and 3rd respectively. The question here is whether on these occasions these rituals, based on the Home Ministry’s regulations, were the only performances constituting the performance dimension of Meiji Jingu. During these three days ‘ordinary’ people were not permitted to enter the inner shrine until after 1 p.m., which suggests that they did not have the opportunity to attend the ceremonies; what was it then that attracted 1,500,000 people? To explain this, I shed light on another institutionalization of events held to commemorate the occasion. Meiji Jingu’s celebration events were held in and around its various spatial structures, namely Meiji Jingu’s inner precinct, its outer precinct and Hibiya park, and so the nature of each ritual space and its relationship to the other spaces were effectively determined through the process of distributing various commemorative events among them. In this way, the spatial distribution of rituals and the differentiation of spaces by rituals mutually worked as mechanisms serving to legitimate each another. The formation of Meiji Jingu ritual time-space should be understood as the process of its legitimization rather than as the consequence of legitimacy.

It must however be made clear that it was not only the Home Ministry and the Foundation Bureau for Meiji Jingu (Meiji Jingu zoei-kyoku) that organized and ordered the various events; there were also other interested parties involved, such as Tokyo Metropolitan District, Tokyo city and the Tokyo Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Tokyo shōgyō kaigi-sho). Joint meetings of such interested groups in Tokyo as well as the Home Ministry formed a significant part of Meiji Jingu festivals. Chugai Shōgyō Shinbun newspaper (1st August 1920) noted how many event proposals had already been submitted to the Foundation Bureau in early 1920 in order to demonstrate their own performances, reporting the Bureau’s comment as follows: ‘The Foundation Bureau does not have any criteria for these events, and whether each event is relevant to the inner precinct is still under consideration.’ The original reason for having the joint meeting was indeed to ‘resolve the appearance of a disordered situation’ and to establish the criteria for ‘relevance’.

How, then, did these joint meetings ultimately solve the disorder in the various proposals for the events? My examination suggests that these events were reordered through spatial distribution. Meiji Jingu celebratory performances were geographically hierarchised; in so doing different places were combined together as spaces for Meiji Jingu celebratory performances. There were not a few disagreements among the meeting members regarding the ‘relevance’ of this or that event, and that the subsequent spatial distribution was the result of their negotiation process. Thus, in the inner precinct the Home Ministry hosted ceremonial rituals based on their own regulations, in the outer precinct (and the grass area of the inner precinct) the Tokyo Metropolitan District, Tokyo city and the Tokyo Chamber of Commerce and Industry jointly hosted ‘traditional’ performances such as yabusame and kyudo Japanese archery, and in Hibiya Park Tokyo city hosted festive entertainments such as kigeki comedies and a katsudo shashin film presentation. The farther the place was set apart from the core shrine building, or the closer the nature of the place approximated that of the park, the more the Meiji Jingu celebration performances seemed to move from the ‘formal’ to the ‘festive’.

Horse racing held in the outer precinct on November 2nd and 3rd 1920. (Kyōiku gahō Tokyo:Dō bunkan 1920 p.64)
These seemingly well-ordered time-space performances were understood and appropriated by ordinary people in their own contexts. There are several reasons for supposing that the situation during the Meiji Jingu festival days would have been somewhat more complex than is indicated by the official story such as in the records of the Home Ministry. One is the sheer scale of the event. For example, it was reported that there were over 1,300 injuries, including one death, amongst the crowds who visited the inner precinct on November 1st; on one day alone over 4,000 pairs of geta and waraji sandals were taken to the police station as lost articles. So what were the peoples’ experiences like?

First of all, entertainment activities such as sideshows, acrobatic performances and stalls were very popular during the Meiji Jingu festival days, and that the main locations for these events were neither the inner precinct nor the outer precinct but the shrine approaches and alleys surrounding the shrine. In particular, according to the Tokyo Asahi Shinbun newspaper, the area from outside the third gate of the inner shrine along with the third shrine approach down to the Yoyogi drill ground seem to have been very congested with tents and stalls as well as with people. The Tokyo Asahi Shinbun reports that the Tokyo people were intoxicated by the festivities, suggesting that the events which attracted most people were entertainments such as the Yoyogi circus troop and puppet shows.

In addition to the lively atmosphere in the streets, it is also worth noting that the most popular Meiji events were held in the evening (sometimes at midnight). As mentioned above, the Home Ministry restricted the visiting hours of ordinary people to the inner precinct. Similar temporal segmentation was made in the case of the Hibiya Park festival. However, in their use of the word ‘fuyajô’ or the city that never sleeps, newspaper reports indicate that it was the brilliantly illuminated entertainments, which attracted most people. An awareness of these street and night performances is important in appreciating how the spatial and temporal regulation decreed by the above-mentioned groups and the Home Ministry were experienced by ordinary people. On the one hand, it is possible to say that the spatiotemporal institutionalization was imposed on the people from above, and that popular entertainment was relegated in the hierarchy. On the other hand, the streets and nights were not viewed by the people concerned as being something inferior; to use the terms of our analysis, they didn’t feel that their space-time was degraded. I want to argue that the distributed space-time hierarchy was reordered in the peoples’ own festive experience, and that it was appropriated as a differently accentuated commemoration of Meiji Jingu. Take for example the parading of the mikoshi; even after the Home Ministry’s order forbidding mikoshi to enter the inner precinct, wards and towns continued to compete in building new mikoshi and did indeed organise mikoshi parades during the Meiji Jingu festival period. Interestingly, these people reinterpreted November 3rd by holding special enshrinement festivals of their own local shrines at the same time, despite the fact that November 3rd bore no relation to the times and places of their shrines’ original establishment. I would argue that the time-space of the Meiji Jingu festival was exploited by them as an expansion of their own mode of festival time-space and the celebration of their own locales.

A broader range of practices were undertaken in Meiji Jingu on and around November 3rd 1920, irrespective of whether or not they were termed ‘religious’, ‘Shinto’, or ‘shrine’ rituals. These spatial practices worked to construct the time-space of Meiji Jingu.

(This paper was originally given in the research student forum co-hosted by Japan Research Centre (SOAS) and Japanese Cultural Studies Programme (Birkbeck) on the 20 of May 2004.)

Yoshiko Imaizumi is a PhD candidate at SOAS, Department of Japan and Korea. Her research project is on The Meiji Jingu.

PhD Research at SOAS on Japanese Religions

Noriko Furukawa, Arts and new religions in Japan: The Fuji Museum (Dr Dolce, Study of Religions)
Chi Ho Ivan Hon, Japanese and Chinese intellectuals views on state and religion in mid 19th- early 20th (Prof. Bocking, Study of Religions)
Satomi Horiiuchi, Contemporary Japanese Christianity: Ancestors, rites and graves (Dr Dolce, Study of Religions)
Yoshiko Imaizumi, The Meiji jingu (Dr Breen, East Asia)
Tullio Lobetti, Faith in the flesh: body and ascetic practices in contemporary Japanese religious context (Dr Dolce, Study of Religions)
Yukiko Nishimura, Worship of Avalokitesvara in Japan (Dr Dolce, Study of Religions)
Fumi Ouchi, The vocal arts in medieval Japan and Tendai hongaku thought (Dr Dolce, Study of Religions)
Anna Schegoleva, Ghosts in Japan: re-constructing horror in modernity (Prof. Bocking, Study of Religions)
Philip Swift, Ghosts and spirit possession in Japan’s new religions (Dr Martinez, Anthropology)
Carla Tronu Montane, A sociology of the Christian mission to Japan (Dr Breen, Dept. of Japan and Korea)
The cherry blossoms came early this year in Tokyo, and the flowers were at their prime in the garden of the International House in Roppongi on March 27th when a presentation ceremony for the Nakamura Hajime Prize was held. Dr Lucia Dolce, the chair of the CSJR, was this year’s recipient of the prize, which is named after the well known scholar of Buddhism and Asian Culture, Nakamura Hajime. This prestigious prize is awarded annually to young scholars who have made an outstanding contribution to the study of Japanese religion and culture. Dr Dolce is the first western scholar to receive this prize.

Professor Nakamura, who taught at Tokyo University for many years, wrote extensively on Indian philosophy, Buddhist thought, and comparative cultural studies. His unorthodox approach, based upon a broad perspective, has been highly regarded in the West as well as in Japan; it was most appropriate that Dr Dolce should receive this award because her research methodology reflected that of Nakamura’s.

In his introductory speech Professor Sueki Fumihiko of Tokyo University described Dr Dolce’s study on “Esoteric Patterns in Nichiren’s Interpretation of the Lotus Sutra” as a ground-breaking work which completely overthrows the common knowledge held in Japan on the relation between Nichiren and esoteric Buddhism. Nichiren has traditionally been regarded as a stern critic of esoteric Buddhism, but Dr Dolce’s original research and methodology, backed by solid philological and doctrinal studies, revealed aspects of Nichiren which had not been focused upon previously. Most importantly she argued that the influence of esoteric doctrine remained at the core of Nichiren’s philosophy throughout his life and provided evidence through her meticulous examination of an array of documents. Professor Sueki particularly admired the way Dr Dolce analyzed “Nichiren’s mandara”, and the way she explored the esoteric rituals and textual sources for this image. He stressed the importance of further research on the profound influence esoteric Buddhism exerted upon, not only Nichiren, but Buddhism as a whole in medieval Japan, and hoped that this prize would encourage further discussion and studies, based on the questions she raised.

Dr Dolce responded by thanking the Japanese scholars who helped and encouraged her research during her stay in Japan, in particular the Nichiren kyogaku kenkyujo at Risshô University, Tokyo University and Waseda University. She remembered the influence that Nakamura’s Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples exerted upon her when she was a young student in Italy, and added that she sincerely hoped that this occasion would offer the opportunity to increase the dialogue between Europe and Japan in the field of Buddhist studies and, more broadly, of religious studies in general.
Members’ Research Related Activities

February

Lucia Dolce spoke on “Gyoki-zu and other ‘esoterica’: mapping Japan in the medieval period,” International Colloquy The Cortazzi Map Digitalization Project, Sainsbury Institute, Norwich. (February 20)

Meri Arichi spoke on “Hie-Sannô Mandara: The Iconography of Kami” at the CSJR Seminar series (26 February).

March

John Breen gave a talk on ‘Yasukuni: behind the chrysanthemum curtain’, at the Foreign Correspondents Press Club, Tokyo (15 March)

Lucia Dolce delivered the paper “Reconsidering Medieval Buddhism Again: Reflections on Ritual and the Study of ‘Japanese Religion’” at the Panel The Consequences of Constituting ‘Japanese Religion’ as an Object of Concern, AAS, San Diego. (March 4-7)

Carla Tronu Montane presented on “Constructing a Place for Christianity in Pre-Modern Japan: A Study of Kirishitan Sacred Space, Body, Religious Practice and Sacred Objects”, at the Research Student Colloquium organized by the ARHB Centre of Oriental and African Literatures at SOAS and UCL, on the occasion of the visit of Prof. Carol Gluck, Columbia University (14 March)

Lucia Dolce went to Tokyo to receive the Nakamura Hajime Award for her study on ‘Esoteric Patterns in Nichiren’s Interpretation of the Lotus Sutra’. (27 March) See report.

April

Lucia Dolce and Meri Arichi conducted fieldwork in Japan, including the Suwa and Sanno matsuri. (March 28-April 15) See report

Lucia Dolce gave a guest lecture on ‘Tantric Buddhism in Medieval Japan’ at the Centre for Buddhist Studies, Istituto Universitario Orientale, Napoli. (21 April)

May

Carla Tronu Montane gave a presentation on ‘Christianity in Early Modern Japan’, at the CSJR Forum (SOAS). (6 May)


Carla Tronu Montane spoke about “The Role of Space in the Cultural Encounter between Christianity and Japan in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries”, at the PhD Forum on Japanese Humanities organized by the Japan Research Centre of SOAS and Birkbeck College (21 May)

June

Lucia Dolce made a presentation on “Continuing shinbutsu rituals at Hiyoshi shrine” at the workshop on Shinto held on the occasion of the donation of the Shinto taikai at the University of Venezia Ca’ Foscari. (June 7) See report

Carla Tronu Montane conducted research at the Historical Archive of the Society of Jesus (ARSI), Rome, Italy, and the Archive of the Congregatio Propaganda Fide. She also visited the library of the Pontificia Università Gregoriana (PUG), and the Historical Institute of the Society of Jesus (IHSI). (20 to 30 June)

July

Lucia Dolce attended the conference ‘Buddhist Monasticism in East Asia,’ St John’s College, Cambridge. (2 July 2004)

Carla Tronu Montane conducted research in Avila, Spain, at the Japanese section of the Dominican Archive of the Province of the Holy Rosary (APSR), Also in Valladolid, Spain, at the Japanese section of the archive of the Augustinians in Valladolid. (4-10 July)

Meri Arichi attended the International Buddhist Art Conference at Lanzhou, University, China. (2 July).

Meri Arichi attended the International Dunhuang Seminar at Dunhuang, China.(5-16 July 2004)

August

John Breen spoke about ‘Juyondai shogun lemochi no joraku to Komei seiken ron’, at Ochanomizu joshi daigaku, Tokyo. (August 2)

Lucia Dolce gave a paper on “The ‘Esoteric Lotus Sutra’: exploring the mandalic icons of the Lotus and the construction of alternative interpretations of mikkyô” at the 6th International conference on the Lotus Sutra, The Lotus Sutra in Asian Culture, University of Toronto. (5-7 August 2004)
Information on Japanese Religions


Anna Andreeva

In May the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia co-hosted a symposium on the Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religions. The discussions, which began at the EAJS Conference in Warsaw in 2003, were continued in Vienna and became a productive intellectual exchange. Dr Bernard Scheid and Dr Cynthia Peck-Kubascek are owed many thanks for their work in organizing the symposium to such a high and efficient level. Their efforts, and those of the Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia, opened the event.

The first and third days of the Vienna symposium were dedicated to Ancient and Medieval Japan. Professor Mark Teeuwen of the University of Oslo presented a paper which addressed the discourse of Medieval Shinto and the art of Experimental Esotericism. The invention of new secret objects and ritual practices, and their interpretation, were a focal point of his presentation. Dr Lucia Dolce of SOAS, University of London, investigated the Taxonomy of the “Esoteric” Taimitsu Hermeneutical and Ritual Practices. She discussed the meaning of mikkō in the Heian and medieval periods and the construction of the esoteric in the Taimitsu tradition, such as Tendai secret teachings and the hokkehō ritual. Professor Bernard Faure of Stanford University described the concept of secrecy in the cult of Vināyaka (Shōten) - originally a demonic deity of India, invoked in black magic rites - and its transformation into the ‘hidden deity’ in medieval Japan. The presentation by Dr Nobumi Iyanaga of Tokyo brought about a fruitful discussion on the understudied Tachikawa-ryū and other apocryphal medieval traditions of Japan.

‘Esotericism Outside Japan’ was the theme of the second day of the symposium. Dr Albert de Jong of Leiden University presented his view on secrecy in antiquity. The social manifestations of secrets and secrecy as well as secret knowledge, rituals and identities were the focal points of his discussion. The discourse of Indian and Buddhist secret knowledge, rituals and identities were the focal points of his discussion. The discourse of Indian and Buddhist traditions, such as Tendai secret teachings and the hokkehō ritual, were a focal point of his presentation. Dr Lucia Dolce of SOAS, University of London, investigated the Taxonomy of the “Esoteric” Taimitsu Hermeneutical and Ritual Practices. She discussed the meaning of mikkō in the Heian and medieval periods and the construction of the esoteric in the Taimitsu tradition, such as Tendai secret teachings and the hokkehō ritual. Professor Bernard Faure of Stanford University described the concept of secrecy in the cult of Vināyaka (Shōten) - originally a demonic deity of India, invoked in black magic rites - and its transformation into the ‘hidden deity’ in medieval Japan. The presentation by Dr Nobumi Iyanaga of Tokyo brought about a fruitful discussion on the understudied Tachikawa-ryū and other apocryphal medieval traditions of Japan.

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Anna Andreeva is a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge. Her research is concentrated on the activities of the Ritsu lineage in the Kamakura and Kenmu periods, and one of the examples of medieval kami worship, Miwa Shinto.
A Shinto Workshop in Venice

Erica Baffelli

On 7 June 2004 a workshop on Shinto took place at the Department of East-Asian studies of Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, lodged in a beautiful 16th century building named Palazzo Vendramin dei Carmini. The occasion was the presentation of the 121 volume set, Shinto Taikei, donated to the library of the Department of East Asian Studies by the International Shinto Foundation.

In the morning, the Director of the East-Asian Studies Department, and the Rector of the university welcomed Professor Umeda Yoshimi, Director General of ISF. Professor Umeda presented the Rector with volumes 1 and 121, “the alpha and the omega of Shinto Taikei” to symbolize the donation. He said that these precious works would be a symbol of mutual understanding between religions and cultures in the spirit of ISF. Furthermore he thanked Dr Lucia Dolce, Chair of the SOAS Centre for the Study of Japanese Religion (SOAS) for bringing the University of Venice (her Alma Mater) in contact with ISF.

In the afternoon the workshop on “Shinto, the Religious Experience of Japan” took place. Four speakers addressed several aspects related to Shinto, including its history and its relationship with Japanese politics and society (Professor Umeda Yoshimi), the training to become kannushi and the role of women in Shinto tradition (Ven. Umeda Setsuko), the exchange between Buddhist and Shinto tradition during the matsuri (Dr Lucia Dolce), the particular features of some matsuri (Dr Simone Dalla Chiesa) and the hermeneutics of ritual language in Shinto (Professor Massimo Raveri, University of Milan).

There was a large response from the audience, and several questions were asked, such as the etymology of the word “Shinto”, the relationship between Shinto and so-called new Japanese religions, the possibility or not for non-Japanese people to become kannushi, and the diffusion in Japan of Shinto rites performed in Buddhist temples, or vice versa.

The conference received very positive feedback from the participants and the discussions continued even after the meeting broke up.

Erica Baffelli is a PhD candidate in Japanese Religions at the University of Venice- Ca’ Foscari.
Japanese Religions and Popular Culture

Japan’s Enduring Religious Festivals

Meri Arichi

In Japan, the communal spirit of its people continually nurtures religious tradition. This is especially evident in the celebration of religious festivals (matsuri), which take place throughout the year, all over the country. During our research trip in April, Lucia Dolce and I were fortunate to be able to witness three very special festivals, the Onbashira matsuri at the Suwa Shrine in Nagano prefecture, the Yasurai matsuri at the Imamiya Shrine in Kyoto, and the Sanno matsuri at the Hie Shrine in Shiga prefecture.

Onbashira matsuri

The famous festival of Onbashira in Suwa, Nagano Prefecture, is held only once every seven years – a chance not to be missed by anyone interested in Japanese religions! The festival is famous for its spectacular, but also difficult and dangerous aspects, and it attracts thousands of tourists from all over Japan. We traveled to see the part of the festival when huge trees trunks are brought down from the mountain to the town.

Onbashira are sacred pillars that stand at the four corners of the Suwa Shrine-complex, marking the sacred area. There are four separate shrines at Suwa, and during the Onbashira festival, which lasts from April to May, a series of rituals is held to symbolically renew the life of kami by replacing the sacred pillars with new ones. There are sixteen pillars in all, each over 17 metres long, which are transported from nearby mountains and erected by the local ujiko (parishioners).

The history of the Suwa Shrine is believed to go back at least 1,500 years. The enshrined deities, Takeminakata no kami and his consort, Yasakatome no kami, are worshipped as the gods of rain and wind, and also as the protectors of water and harvest.

The ancient origin of the Onbashira matsuri could be clearly observed by the primitive method with which the massive pillars, each weighing over 10 tonnes, were transported in a ceremony called Yamadashi. Two horn-like poles (medo) were attached to both ends of the pillar, with several young men perched upon them, apparently to prevent the pillar rolling sideways and also to balance it. Two extremely long ropes were attached to the pillars and then pulled by literally hundreds of men, women and children for miles along the narrow road, to an accompaniment of noisy music and singing. Negotiating a sharp bend of the narrow road required a particularly skilful manoeuvre, but everyone involved seems to enjoy this time-consuming, and labour-intensive procedure.

The climax of the matsuri was the Kiotoshi ceremony on the next day in which the pillars were dragged up to the top of a hill, and then “dropped” down the slope at a great speed, with many men courageously clinging on to the medo. The thrill of the dangerous plunge seemed an important element of this part of the Onbashira matsuri which seemed more focused on the entertainment aspect and the benefit of the local tourism than the religious significance of the renewal of the pillar. The final stage of the Onbashira matsuri was to be held in May when all the pillars will be erected in the shrine complex.

Whilst in Suwa, a rare opportunity to learn about Suwa’s pre-Meiji religious practices was provided by Mr. Kitamura, a producer of documentary films on religion. He was kind enough to take us on a tour of the ancient sacred places in Suwa, and to introduce us to Mrs Moriya, the present head of this priestly family, whose ancestors acted as hereditary shaman-like priests, guarding the belief in indigenous kami, called mishaguchi. The family controlled the Suwa area long before the deity Takeminakata no kami, who is considered to be a son of Ôkuninushi no mikoto, was solicited from Izumo by a rivaling family. This, no doubt, was a politically motivated move to bring the area under the control of...
imperial authority. It is, however, remarkable that the Moriya family remained as one of the jinchokan (head priest) and the primordial belief in mishaguchi survive in this area to this day. Remains of the 3 - 4th century kofun burial mound near the Moriya residence are further evidence of the ancient family’s history involving religious activities in the area. A display of historical documents and artefacts in the small museum, Moriya shiryôkan, also provided valuable insight into this important, yet little known belief.

(Mishaguchi on the grounds of the Moriya family residence.
Photo by Lucia Dolce.)

Yasurai matsuri

The following week, we arrived in Kyoto on the 11th April, the day of Yasurai matsuri at the Imamiya Shrine. This is one of the oldest festivals in Kyoto, originating from the Heian period when ritual dances were performed in order to repel the epidemics that spread in the capital, often in spring. It was a very popular event, and traditionally, the inhabitants of the capital dressed up in their best attire, and visited the shrine to pray for good health. In fact, it became so popular and extravagant that Emperor Konoe had to ban the festival in 1154; but it was revived in 1210, and survives to this day.

The highlight of the matsuri was a procession of big red umbrellas carried by local ujiko, dressed in traditional costume, and accompanied by musicians and dancers. The most stunning and spectacular among them were young men dressed as oni (demons) in red robes and bright red and black wigs. They danced energetically in front of the shrine, leaping and stamping their feet, symbolically quelling diseases. A special umbrella was set up in the prayer hall, and decorated with paper flowers to attract ekishin (the evil spirits of epidemics). Visitors were encouraged to buy a hitogata (paper doll), write their name on it, and walk with it under the umbrella. The dolls, meant to catch diseases instead of the petitioners, were then dedicated at a special alter in the prayer hall, and burnt afterwards in a ceremony, thus guaranteeing one’s health for the rest of the year.

(Mishaguchi on the grounds of the Moriya family residence.
Photo by Lucia Dolce.)

Sanno matsuri

One of the most important purposes of our research trip to Japan was to visit the Hie Shrine during the time of Sanno matsuri which is held on the 12th to 14th April every year. The Hie Shrine, situated on the south-west side of Lake Biwa at the foot of Mount Hiei, enshrines a group of kami who are collectively called Sanno, which literally means the Mountain King. The origin of the Hie Shrine goes back at least to the Kofun period (3rd – 6th centuries AD), long before the introduction of Buddhism to Japan. Archaeological evidence suggests that primitive religious activities were conducted by the rock near the summit of Mount Hachioji, the sacred mountain in the shrine complex.

When Saicho established the Enryaku-ji on Mount Hiei in the early Heian period, he regarded the Sanno deities as protectors of his temple, thereby initiating a long association of the Hie Shrine with Tendai Buddhism. The Enryaku-ji flourished under imperial patronage, and at the height of its prosperity the Hie Shrine encompassed twenty-one major shrines, organized into three main groups of Upper Seven, Middle Seven, and Lower Seven, as well as numerous subsidiary shrines. The enshrined kami were identified with Buddhas and bodhisattvas in accordance with the theory of honji-suijaku (Origin and Trace). Mt Hiei ultimately developed into one of the largest temple-shrine complexes in medieval Japan.

Some aspects of this ancient belief are still evident in the present day Sanno matsuri, as in the ceremonial descent of two mikoshi (sacred palanquins) from Mount Hachioji on the 12th April. Traditionally, to mark seasonal changes, agricultural kami are brought down from their mountain-residence to the village where they were welcomed and entertained. The two mikoshi carrying the aramitama (rough spirit) of the male kami, Oyamakui no kami, and the female kami, Kamo-tamayori hime, are joined by two more mikoshi carrying the nigimitama (pacified spirit) of the same couple in the yoimiya (Evening resting place). In the morning, to mark the marriage of the kami, priests performed a ritual dedication of bowls of tea. The union of the couple was later celebrated in a more boisterous manner in the ritual, Yoimiya-otoshi, when all four mikoshi were shaken and swung back and forth in turn by the local youths dressed only in loin cloths. The ritual is thought to symbolize the birth of wakamiya, the couple’s offspring. The evening ended with a rampagous race of four mikoshi to the Nishi-hongu (the Western Main Shrine), where they remained, ready for the next day’s ceremony.

Hitogata (paper dolls) are meant to catch diseases instead of petitioners.
In sharp contrast to the rough and noisy celebration of the night before, the morning Nishi-hongu ceremony was a solemn and serious affair. The seven mikoshi of the seven principal kami were placed in the player hall in front of the shrine, and a ritual was performed by priests, in traditional costume, with an invocation of Shinto norito (prayers) by the head priest. It was followed by the dedication of heihaku (paper offerings in the five Buddhist colors) by the aged Zasu, the head Abbot of Tendai Buddhism in Japan. The monks of Enryakuji chant The Heart Sutra in front of the shrine. The ritual ends with the dedication of branches of a sacred tree to the kami by local dignitaries. The participation of Shinto priests, Buddhist monks, and the local people in this ritual reflected the typical medieval religious phenomenon of Japan, shinbutsu-shugo (kami-buddha combination), and it was particularly interesting to see that the tradition is still maintained today.

After the ceremony, seven mikoshi were transported by local youths down to Karasaki on the shore of Lake Biwa, and then were taken on a barge to the middle of the lake where a ritual dedication of offerings to the kami took place. This ceremony retraces the legendary journey of Onamuchi no kami, who was solicited to Hie during the reign of Emperor Tenji (r. 662-673). According to the Muromachi period text, Gonjinsho, the kami travelled from Mount Miwa by boat, and was entertained by the local fisherman with a meal of millet off the shore of Karasaki. The colourful Sanno matsuri on the lake was a popular subject for festival screens, especially in the Edo period, and many surviving examples of six-fold screens convey the history of the thriving community that supported the Hie-Sanno cult in pre-modern times. The passage of time has made it necessary to bring in a few changes, and in the present day, the mikoshi are placed on the barge pulled by a tag boat with engines, instead of by rowboats. Nevertheless, the important tradition of the ritual on the water is kept alive.

It is often feared that today's youths are disinterested in old customs, and that local traditions are fast disappearing in Japan. The problem was evident in the case of Sanno matsuri in which two out of the seven mikoshi had to be transported by vans instead of being carried on the shoulders of local youths. However, those who took part in all three festivals seemed very happy to participate, and it is my hope that the spirit of community continues to nurture centuries-old religious traditions.

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