

## Between Regional and National Identity: Spectacle and Festival in Modern Japan

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Distinctive cultures of display and spectacle mark the regional diversity of Japanese festivals. At the same time, material and ritual links among these traditions speak to broader forces of cultural standardization and commodification. This paper examines the mobile architecture and wood sculpture of festival floats (*dashi*) in central Japan as discursive and material markers of the connections between local Shintō festivals (*matsuri*) and broader agendas of nationalism in modern Japan. The Chita peninsula in Aichi prefecture is famous for *dashimatsuri*, Shintō shrine festivals featuring the procession of huge, wheeled floats called *dashi*. I argue that the recurrent reinvention of festive material culture and ritual has reflected and influenced broader ideological and social transformations.

As the religious historian Helen Hardacre has shown, the modern reconfiguration of religious ritual as part of the construction of State Shintō co-opted local practices into larger discourses of national cultural identity. Studies of the art, architecture and ritual of *dashi* festivals view them as unchanging folk art and local practices that embody the cultural values of the merchant class of early modern (1600-1868) Japan. However, during Japan's rapid modernization during the Meiji period (1868-1912), the ritual and doctrinal disciplining of *matsuri* through official programs of shrine consolidation, ritual standardization, and fiscal austerity transformed the cultural landscape of popular festivity in modern Japan. I argue that most surviving *dashimatsuri* reflect their early 20<sup>th</sup>-century reinvention as local expressions of popular nationalism. The ritual process and sculptural iconography of festival floats on the Chita peninsula reflected and reinforced discourses of national cultural exceptionalism and colonialism.