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The Ritual Significance of Purification Practices in Japan

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Pollution and purification are two concepts often used in relation to traditional Japanese culture and its peculiar rituals. From the elegant wells placed near the entrance to shrines, inviting visitors and believers alike to perform the customary ablutions (sometimes clear instructions are displayed in plain view), to the mounds of salt placed near house gates or restaurant doors, to fierce-looking *yamabushi* who walk on fire, once we immerse ourselves into the Japanese culture, we are surrounded by symbols that seem to indicate a desire to separate the sacred from the profane and to purify oneself in order to prevent disease, misfortune, or the wrath of gods. However, “purification” is a widely misapprehended concept, particularly in the case of Japanese rituals, and salt, fire and water are used not necessarily to cleanse, but to perform magic acts as well. In an attempt to shed some light on this matter, I shall discuss the significance and the role played by the above-mentioned elements in Japanese tradition, focusing on several specific examples.

In any culture, a ritual act represents a complex enterprise that requires physical and mental preparation on the part of the performer, and a highly significant role in that process is held by purification. In Japanese tradition, *harae* (“purification”) is a ritual gesture meant to remove all evil and pollution that might disturb one’s connection with the sacred. In Japan, purification is performed before all religious rites and various other relevant events in the life of the community, as well as each time an individual pays a visit to a shrine.

When performed by a priest, the purification rite involves the use of a *heihaku* (a wand with white paper strips) waved in front of the object of the ritual. This is a gesture that can be observed in the initial stage of all Shintō rituals, thus emphasizing the importance of symbolical cleanliness before any kind of contact with the sacred can be established. The ablutions that are meant to remove all

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possible defilement from the body and the spirit are called *misogi* and the origins of this custom are recorded in the ancient chronicles *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*. Izanagi, the male of the primordial couple, goes on a journey to the other world in an attempt to bring back his wife, the goddess Izanami, who had died giving birth to the Fire God. Izanagi's quest fails because, like Orpheus, he breaks the taboo of not looking back and sees his wife's decomposing body, and on his return to the world of the living, Izanagi must cleanse himself of all the pollution accumulated during his contact with the world of the dead. The purification rite performed by Izanagi involves water only, and thus water has remained the main purification means.

Laymen and priests alike can purify themselves by rinsing their mouth and pouring clear water over their hands in a ritual act called *temizu* ("hand water"), or they can perform *misogi*, the whole-body purification. This ritual, although it may seem obsolete, is still widely practiced and respected in Japanese society, to the extent that some temples actually post instruction boards near the water wells, explaining to the visitors how to perform the ablutions: first wash your left hand, then your right hand, then rinse your mouth, without touching the provided wooden dipper directly with your lips².

Nevertheless, water is not the only way of establishing a connection with the sacred or of removing impurities. In Japanese culture, the three elements that facilitate the passage from the sacred to the profane are salt, fire and water, each having a distinct, characteristic function while at the same time maintaining a strong relationship with the other two.

Of the three, salt is the most commonly seen outside ceremonial occasions and it is viewed as a substance that is not only indispensable to daily life, but also as a magical instrument that can ward off evil forces. That is why salt is usually placed in small mounds at the gate or near the entrance to houses and stores, used by Shinto priests in purification rituals or by sumo wrestlers before the beginning of a match. Salt becomes a kind of offering to the gods, and Yanagita Kunio mentions a legend about salt placed under a bridge that disappears overnight, which means that the god accepted the offering. However, while the gods seem to like offerings of salt, evil forces are repelled by it; ghosts and monsters crave sweet things, such as rice buns filled with sweet bean paste, yet they abhor the sight of salt³. Nowadays, people who attend a funeral receive a small gift that is always accompanied by a small sachet of salt, to purify themselves after the contact with

² Images explaining the ablution etiquette can be seen (for example) at the Kamigamo Shrine in Kyoto.

³ K. Yanagita: "Hashi no Na to Densetsu", in Yanagita Kunio Shū 5, Chikuma Shobō, Tokyo 1968, p. 462

death.

One special event when the magical function of salt becomes apparent is the *Hari-kuyō*⁴ ceremony from Awashima Shrine in Wakayama. *Hari-kuyō* (“religious service for needles”) is a ritual conducted annually on February 8th, when rusty or blunt needles from all over the country are collected at the shrine in order to receive a symbolic burial. This is also an occasion to express gratitude towards these inanimate objects which have been particularly useful during daily life, that is why the ceremony is attended by seamstresses from various areas of Japan. The ritual itself is very short: rich offerings of vegetables and *sake* are given to the gods, the priest chants a brief prayer, after which the *miko* carry trays with needles and with salt to the *shio-zuka* (“salt mound”), a big rock placed on the left side of the main hall. Another prayer is said in front of the stone representing the grave for needles, and the needles are solemnly interred, with salt poured on top of them.



Miko carrying trays of salt



Salt covered needles

Yanagita considers that the magical powers attributed to salt come from the connection between salt and seawater, as seawater was always present in old rituals and used both as a purification instrument and as an offering to the gods⁵. In the case of *Hari-kuyō*, we may believe that salt was used the same way fire is used to burn old prayer tablets – objects that are no longer useful in the human world must be sent to the other world through one of the elements that make the passage possible and, as metal needles do not burn, salt is used as a substitute for fire.

⁴ The information related to this event was obtained during fieldwork conducted by the author in February^y 2011.

⁵ K. Yanagita: “Shio Zatsudan”, in Yanagita Kunio Shū 14, Chikuma Shobō, Tokyo 1974

Fire, on the other hand, seems to be viewed as the most powerful element, able to both bring something of the sacred into this world and to open the gates to the other. Izanami, the mother-goddess who created the Japanese Archipelago and most of the Japanese gods, died giving birth to the Fire God, an episode that is relevant from two perspectives: first, Izanami's death represents in itself a myth of origin, as death did not, could not exist until it happened for the first time; second, it is fire that facilitates the transition from one level of existence to another. Izanami died, but that does not mean that she disappeared; on the contrary, she continues to exist in the world of shadows, changing her role as creator for that of destroyer and death-bringer.

Fire is still used in Japanese rituals to establish a connection between the known world, inhabited by living humans, and the world of spirits and things passed. In the beginning of every year, shrines all over Japan make huge bonfires named *dondoyaki*, where used New Year decorations and amulets are burned. At Buddhist temples, similar fires are lit for the burning of prayer tablets and amulets that had been used during the previous year. In both cases, the objects to be cremated are not viewed as no longer useful, but rather as something that has fulfilled its role on this existential level and must now ritually pass into the other, fire being the potent element which opens the pathway.

A special ceremony named *Saitō Ōgomaku* is performed at the Shingon temple Gangō-ji⁶ in Nara on *Setsubun* day (February 3rd). *Goma* (originating in the Sanskrit *homa*) is a term referring to an esoteric Buddhist ritual in which offerings are made to the deity Fudō Myōō (Acalanātha in Sanskrit, a deity who embodies Enlightenment and who is described with flames surging from his body) in order to prevent calamities and increase merit. The offerings are made through fire, the burning of firewood symbolizing the destruction by wisdom of evil passions and karma. The fact that at Gangō-ji this ritual takes place on *Setsubun*, a day when demons are exorcized all over the country, is highly significant, as the two rituals work for the same objective: getting rid of all evil, be it visible (such as evil forces that manifest themselves through natural calamities) or invisible (all the base thoughts and desires hidden inside the human soul).

The bonfire is prepared the day before and in the morning of February 3rd people gather at Gangō-ji to watch the big bonfire, tended to by *yamabushi*. Prayer tablets can be bought in advance or on the same day, and they will all be burnt later, according to the belief that Fudō Myōō will receive all the requests that have been cast into fire. *Yamabushi* (literally, "mountain sleepers") are important characters on the stage of Japanese tradition, and during the *Saitō Ōgomaku*

⁶ Fieldwork conducted in February 2008 and February 2011.

ritual they display their ability to control fire by allowing the flames to rise and then dousing them with water, so that huge billows of smoke would go high into the sky.

According to Reverend Taizen Tsujimura⁷, the chief priest from Gangō-ji, this fire ceremony is both a kind of fire worship and a show for the benefit of the public. The fierce looking *yamabushi*, who traditionally lived as hermits in the mountains and descended into villages dressed in tattered clothes and animal skins, with long, unkempt hair, are no different from the *namahage* demons in Akita, and fulfill a similar function: announcing the advent of spring. The Japanese say that “when the devils come down, the spring will come”, so *Saitō Ōgomaku* is a ceremony that invites spring, while at the same time purifying the participants’ spirits and sending forth their prayers for peace and happiness.

The climax of the ritual is the fire-walking ceremony. After the prayer tablets and the big logs of firewood have burnt almost to the ground, the *yamabushi* show yet another of their magical powers, namely that of walking on hot coals.



Yamabushi walking on fire

However, during the fire-walking ritual they are not allowed to use water, so they replace it with salt, a substance which both attracts water and has purifying properties. Salt is sprinkled into the fire and is placed at the end of the fire path, so that the person who has crossed the fire would step into it and thus perform a double purification gesture. After the *yamabushi* cross the fire, when the coals have cooled enough, some of the spectators gathered in the temple precincts are

⁷ Interview conducted on March 4th, 2011.

allowed to imitate them and walk on fire – a symbolical gesture meant to prevent misfortune and heal diseases.

A similar event takes place on Mt Koya, the famous mountain region from Wakayama Prefecture known as the world headquarters of the Buddhist Shingon sect. Each year, on the first Sunday of March, *Hi-matsuri*⁸ (“Fire Festival”) is performed in an attempt to rush the coming of spring, prevent evil and invite good luck and “open the mountain”. The *yama-aki* (“mountain-opening”) ritual is connected to the coming of spring, as it indicates that the mountain path, until then inaccessible to people because of snow, have been cleared and can be used again. *Hi-matsuri* begins at noon, in front of Kongōbu-ji, where people gather to buy the prayer tablets that will be incinerated in the big bonfire, or simply to take part in the festive event, marked by various drum concerts. As in the case of the *Saitō Ōgomaku* from Gangō-ji, the *yamabushi* conduct the entire ceremony, showing their skills in controlling the fire. However, no fire-walking ritual takes place here; after the big fire has burnt down, the participants queue to be blessed by the priests.

Wakayama Prefecture is also the stage of one more *Hi-matsuri*⁹, a festival held in summer, on July 14th, at Kumano Nachi-taisha. The Kumano mountains are an area designated as a World Heritage Site, and near the shrine there is a waterfall, Nachi-no-Otaki, which is regarded as a *go-shintai* (a sacred object chosen by the gods as one of their sacred dwellings). The waterfall became an object of worship because, according to legend, the spirit of Ōkuninushi-no-kami descended there and chose it as his dwelling following a request from Emperor Kammu.

On July 14th, each of the twelve gods (one for each month of the year) revered at Kumano Nachi-taisha are transferred into as many *mikoshi* (“ceremonial floats”) for their annual journey to the waterfall. The *mikoshi* are six meters tall and they are decorated with fans (*ōgi* in Japanese), that is why they are called *ōgi-mikoshi*. The twelve *mikoshi* are met on their way to the waterfall by twelve big torches (*taimatsu*), each weighing between fifty and sixty kilograms and having a diameter of fifty centimeters. The torches are supposed to light the way for the deities on their journey on the dark mountain path and, more importantly, to purify the realm they are about to enter. The ritual, like many of the Japanese *matsuri*, has a theatrical aspect as well, the climax of the ceremony being reached when the people carrying the *mikoshi* rush up the path, while those waving the torches hurry down from the mountain to meet them, among cries announcing

⁸ Fieldwork conducted in March 2007.

⁹ H. Tahashi (ed.): *Sairei Gyōji Futokendō Betsu Zen 47 Kan*, Ōfū, Tokyo 1991~1999

strength and excitement.

After the deities have been carried to the top of the mountain, a priest performs the religious ritual in front of the one hundred thirty-three meter-tall Nachi-no-Otaki, a prayer meant to renew the divine spirit dwelling there and to restore him to his full powers. Besides the spectacular aspect of Nachi-no-hi-matsuri, the clear distinction that is made here between the sacred and the profane is noticeable. The valley is the regular world, the world of humans and unavoidable pollution. The deity, on the other hand, resides up in the mountains, continuously purified and revitalized by the waterfall, and the great *kami* can only be approached through a path of fire. It is not hard to imagine that the impressive torches waved on the forest path are in fact magical gates that open only once a year, to allow a glimpse of the divine realm within and to offer the participants a chance to send in their prayers and receive the blessings from beyond.

A different type of *Hi-matsuri* can be observed in Kyoto, at Iwakura-jinja¹⁰. Probably the best known observance involving fire in Kyoto is *Kurama Hi-matsuri*, yet the ceremony from Iwakura-jinja, performed for a much smaller audience, has an undeniable flavor of authenticity, and its origins remain wrapped in mystery. One legend says that, a long time ago, people living around the shrine had been tormented by two huge snakes, one male and one female. Not knowing what to do, they prayed to their god – Iwakura Ōkami, the the Great God of the Rock. Iwakura Ōkami appeared in the villagers' dreams and told them that fire was the only way to get rid of the snakes. People followed the deity's advice and made two big torches which they burnt in front of the shrines, thus banishing the snakes from their neighborhood forever. Two different beliefs can be noticed here: one is the ancient theme of fire worship, suggesting that fire should be offered to a deity, who will manifest itself through it; the other is related to the Japanese myth according to which fire can send a person or a god to the other world; by following Iwakura Ōkami's advice, his parishioners banish the snakes from their realm in a way that is similar to Izanami's disappearance from the human world.

Iwakura Hi-matsuri takes place in autumn, on the Saturday closest to October 23rd. Two impressive torches, representing the male and the female snake, are placed in advance on each side of the main altar, to be ritually lit a couple of hours after midnight. Before lighting the torches, the men who helped make them partake of a ritual meal around a fire, the entire setting being strongly suggestive of a fire-worship rite, especially since the weather is definitely not cold enough to require a fire. Fire is set to the torches at around 2:30 a.m. on Saturday, amid the

¹⁰ Fieldwork conducted in October 2008.

participants' loud cheering, and the torches are carefully watched until the fires burn down at around 6 o'clock in the morning. When only glowing embers are left, the men take the *mikoshi* from the altar and carry the god to its "visiting place", not far from Iwakura-jinja, from where it will be returned to the shrine around noon the same day.

The *Hi-matsuri* at Iwakura-jinja does not include any forms of entertainment, as it is often the case with other *matsuri*, mostly because this is not an event meant for outsiders. Its purpose is not community bonding or amusement, but strictly protection against evil, and it is the magical powers of fire that help achieve this objective.

Fire magic at work can be observed during another festive event occurring later in the year, on December 14th, at Iwatsuta-jinja¹¹, in Sakai, south of Osaka. The god worshipped at Iwatsuta-jinja is one of the more interesting figures of Japanese mythology, the god Hiruko. Hiruko (his name has often been translated as "leech child") was the first offspring of the primordial couple Izanagi and Izanami. However, during their marriage ritual, after descending from the sky and going around the Heavenly Pillar, the goddess Izanami spoke first in invitation and the child born from her union with Izanagi could not use his feet. The gods saw this as a mistaken ritual, as it was not for the female to speak first, and they decided to cast away their failed creation, the result of Izanami's hubris. Hiruko, like Moses, was put in a reed basket and cast into the water. It was precisely his unlucky birth that seemed to ensure Hiruko's destiny as a god of good luck. In later stories, Hiruko turned into Ebisu, a maritime deity and one of the seven Gods of Good Luck.

According to the legend recorded at Iwatsuta-jinja, Hiruko drifted to the shores near the shrine, where some fishermen found him almost frozen to death. To warm him up, they used one hundred and eight bunches of straw, nowadays represented by a big bonfire. The event is re-enacted on the evening of December 14th, under the name of "Yassai Hossai" – the interjection shouted by the men who cross the fire. The ritual itself is relatively short: like during most *Hi-matsuri*, the greater part of the celebration is spent watching the high flames, the ancestral feelings of awe and fear towards the overwhelming powers of fire being temporarily remembered. When the burning logs have turned into hot coal, men wearing only white cotton trousers and high cotton belts carry Hiruko three times across the fire.

¹¹ Fieldwork conducted in December 2007, 2008, 2011.



The God Hiruko being carried across the fire

After that, anybody who is willing can attempt walking on the glowing embers, although the act implies more danger than fire-walking at Gangō-ji, as the coals are still burning hot and sparks fly high as people run through the fire. Nowadays, the fire-crossing gesture is viewed as a purification act, since it is believed that all evils and disease afflicting the human body are burnt away, and those who can complete the ritual acquire a kind of magic immunity against illness and bad luck. Hiruko's presence, however, indicates a deeper meaning: Hiruko represents the "small individual", to borrow Yanagita Kunio's phrase, who is destined to accomplish great acts. He is twice purified: once through water and once through fire, and goes twice on a journey to the other world. In this respect, his passage from one world to another is the opposite of those made by his divine parents. Izanami passes to the world of shadows through fire and Izanagi returns to the human world through water purification. Hiruko, on the contrary, leaves the divine world and faces death when he is set adrift in a reed boat (that is, through water) and returns to the world of the living through the blessing warmth of fire.

The connection between fire and water as purification means and ways into the sacred is deep and intricate, and in many Japanese rituals we can observe the usage of both, for similar purposes. For example, during the *Tsuina-shiki*¹² (a ceremony performed on *Setsubun* day) at Nagata-jinja in Kobe, the men who will play the demon roles gather on the seashore early in the morning and purify themselves by bathing in seawater.

¹² Fieldwork conducted in February 2011 and 2012.



Ritual ablutions on Suma Beach, Kobe

We have already remarked upon the importance of seawater in Shinto rituals; the significant element here is that the men purify themselves in their human quality. They have been chosen to play the demon parts during the *Setsubun-matsuri* and they may not approach the sacred while tainted by their human passions and weaknesses. Bathing in ice-cold seawater on a February morning represents an act of asceticism related to the *yamabushi* practices and the single way to approach the sacred. The purification ritual on the seashore is merely the first step towards complete purification; the next is taken when the men perform *suigyō* (“purification through water”) within the shrine precincts, this time using water from the shrine well.

Only when these quite painful preparations have been completed can the men enter the *oni mura* (“demon chamber”) and don the costumes that turn them into deities, namely, good demons who descend among people to ward off calamities and epidemics. When they leave the *oni mura*, wearing the demon masks, the air in front of them is purified with burning straw torches, a suggestive gesture clearly showing that water cleanses and prepares the protagonist of the ritual, while fire actually opens the door to the other world.

A similar combination of fire and water as main instruments of a ritual can be observed during the *Somin-sai*¹³, an event celebrated in February at the Kokuseki-ji, in Oshū City, Iwate Prefecture. *Somin-sai* is widely known as a type of *Hadaka-matsuri* (“nakedness festival”), but this over one thousand year old tradition has deeper meanings and multiple aspects. Although the actual event takes place in February, the preparations begin on December 13th of the previous year, when the temple’s parishioners go to gather wood for the *otachiki* (“standing wood”), a big round bonfire supported by forty or fifty logs tied together with a rope, so that the entire arrangement resembles a giant *kadomatsu* (“New Year

¹³ Fieldwork conducted in February 2009.

decoration”). This has led to the interpreting of the *otachiki* as an actual *kadomatsu*, or *yorishiro*. However, the parishioners see it as an offering to the temple, a belief which seems to support the idea of fire worship. Despite its sacred nature, the *otachiki* undergoes further purification by being sprinkled with salt. After the bonfire has been prepared, most of the participants’ actions leading to the festival night are in one way or another related to the ritual, namely, they share a symbolic meal on New Year’s Day and they purify themselves by bathing in the frozen waters of the Ruritsubo River, in a ritual called *mizugori* (“purifying oneself with cold water”). *Kori* is actually a Buddhist term meaning to offer prayers by mortifying one’s body with cold water, and, as it can be observed from the rituals discussed above, purification through water in Japanese culture is more than a symbolical sprinkling of water during a ceremony and it involves rather severe ascetic practices. In many cases, these practices have come to be associated with Buddhism, but that does not mean that they represent exclusively the Buddhist tradition; on the contrary, it can be said that Japanese Buddhism borrowed these practices from the indigenous tradition, where they have deeper roots.

Those who take part in *Somin-sai* continue a strict purification regimen involving ritual ablutions and fasting, necessary during their labours towards preparing the ritual objects. Kneading the “mandala rice”, glutinous rice from which figurines in the shape of the twelve zodiac signs will be made as offerings to the deities, putting together the torches that will be used during *Somin-sai*, or making the *komagi* – wooden amulets shaped like six-faceted wands. The role of salt and water as means of entering the sacred – reminiscent of sea water – is again obvious, as the women who weave the *somin bukuro* (“the hemp bags containing the *komagi*”) first purify themselves with hot water to which they added salt. The *komagi* are amulets designed to protect against evil and plagues, the characters *Somin Shōrai shison* (“the descendants of Somin Shōrai”) being inscribed upon it. The explanation, as well as the origin of the event as a whole, lie in the following legend. The Heavenly Deity called Mutō (in the Kokuseki-ji records, the name appears as Takeaki-kami) started on a journey to find a wife near the South Sea. As night was near, he decided to look for shelter in a nearby village, where two brothers named Kotan Shōrai and Somin Shōrai lived. Somin was very poor, while Kotan was extremely rich. However, the rich brother refused to offer shelter to the deity, while the poor brother treated him with the utmost kindness. The god left in the morning, but years later eight princes returned to the village, inquiring after the descendants of Somin Shōrai. They found just one granddaughter and advised her to wear around her waist a wreath made of entwined reeds. During the night, all the people in the village were killed, except

the Somin Shōrai's granddaughter, who received further advice from one *kami*. The divinity who asked for shelter and who revealed himself as Susano-o-no-mikoto told the girl that from then on, when a plague was upon the village, she and her children should make similar wreaths and proclaim loudly "We are the descendants of Somin Shōrai", this being a sure way to escape disease¹⁴.

Thus, one of the purposes of *Somin-sai* is to ward off disease, that is the first stage of the event involves men and women who are of the *yakudoshi* ("inauspicious age"), namely 25, 42 and 61 for men, 19, 33, 37 for women. On the first Saturday of February, at 10 o'clock in the evening, men and women who have reached or will reach one these inauspicious ages during that year go toward the Ruritsubo River carrying paper lanterns. The men wear only the traditional Japanese underwear *fundoshi* and they perform the purification ritual in the half frozen water of the river. The ritual itself is called *hadaka-mairi* ("the naked procession") or *natsu-mairi* ("the summer procession", an allusion to the fact that the participants are naked, despite the bitter winter cold) and it represents a form of prayer for a good year, devoid of calamities and disease.

Once the ablutions are completed, the participants head back towards the temple, where, at around 11:30 at night, the *hitaki-nobori* ("climbing the bonfire") is performed. This next ritual gesture consists of the same men who bathed in the cold water now climbing on the burning bonfire erected in front of the main hall, and attempting to stand on the hot logs for as long as possible. Again we witness a kind of transcendence between realms facilitated by these two ascetic practices. The participants have eliminated all traces of human impurities from their bodies through immersion in the cold water and now they can cross the border between the worlds using a bridge of fire.

The climax of the event is reached at around 5 o'clock in the morning, when the naked participants climb the wooden pillars in front of the main hall and try to collect as many *komagi* as possible, as the *somin bukuro* will be ritually cut and the wooden amulets spread in front of the temple's main hall. Although this is the most eagerly expected moment of the celebration, ritually speaking it marks a return to normality, to the human world. The participants, who had the chance to partake of the sacred through their contact with the fire and water, now regain their mortal status while fighting for amulets representing the goodwill of the real deities.

A related event, called *Hadaka-matsuri*¹⁵ ("the nakedness festival") can be

¹⁴ *Fudoki*, Shogakkan, Tokyo 1997

¹⁵ Fieldwork conducted in February 2011.

observed at Saidai-ji in Okayama, on the third Saturday of February. The official name of the ritual is *Eyō* and it was established 500 years ago in direct relationship with the *Shushō-e* ceremony from Tōdai-ji in Nara. The records from Saidai-ji mention that in 1510, the priest Chūa distributed wooden amulets from Tōdai-ji to his parishioners by throwing them in the air. As the amulets were regarded as particularly efficient against all kinds of evil, the parishioners fought to catch them and even discarded their clothes in order to be able to move more freely. The ritual has continued to this day, the wooden amulets (called *shingi*, yet similar to the *komagi* distributed at Kokuseki-ji) being thrown by a priest from a high window into a mass of practically naked bodies eagerly awaiting the shower of good luck charms.

Eyō also involves lengthy preparations, which usually begin two weeks before the actual event, when priests gather at Saidai-ji to purify their bodies and spirits, and to offer daily prayers for peace, safety, bountiful crops and happiness of the people. Contact with any kind of pollution is strictly forbidden, which means that if death occurs in the family of one of the parishioners, a priest who does not take part in the ritual will be asked to perform the necessary funerary rites. In this respect, *Eyō* is closer in structure and ritual observance to the *Shuni-e* from Tōdai-ji than to *Somin-sai*, the former being entirely conducted by priests, while during the latter the priest's role is not particularly emphasized, the villagers acting as main protagonists both during the preparations and during the festival itself.

Anybody, not only local people, is welcome to participate in the *Hadaka-matsuri*, with the condition they abstain from alcohol consumption – a rule which is related to public order rather than tradition, seeing that traditionally alcohol consumption was a given during festivals, performed both for personal pleasure and as a kind of offering to the gods. At around 8 o'clock in the evening the purification ceremony begins. The participants, wearing only *fundoshi*, come in groups to perform ablutions in a pool of sacred water built inside the temple precincts. An interesting element here is the presence of women in the purification ceremony; although they do not take part in the *hon-oshi* (the fight for catching the *shingi*), some of the female parishioners choose to perform the purification ceremony, who is said to have beneficial effects on the body and spirit. When they have finished, men come in groups and jump in the pool, whose entrance is marked by a *torii* (the sacred Shinto gate) and in whose middle there is a statue of the Goddess of Mercy, Kannon.



Kori—the ritual purification

In the ceremonies and rituals discussed above, one cannot but notice that the Buddhist ceremonies involving fire are focused around the deity Fudō Myōō, traditionally described as surrounded by flames, while those involving water are a form of prayer to either Yakushi Nyōrai (the men who play the demon roles during the *Tsuina-shiki* at Nagata-jinja will pray to Yakushi Nyōrai after their seawater ablutions; while the main deity worshipped at Kokuseki-ji is the same Yakushi Nyōrai) or the deity Kannon (at Saidai-ji or Tōdai-ji). Yakushi Nyōrai (Bhaiṣajyagurubuddha in Sanskrit) is the Buddha of Medicine, his association with water probably coming from the belief that water can cure disease and wash away evil, especially in Japan, where hot springs with curative powers were not unusual. In fact, that is why statues of Yakushi Nyōrai are often seen in hot spring resorts.

The relationship between Kannon (Avalokiteśvara in Sanskrit) and water is less obvious, although the deity, commonly represented as female in Japan, often stands in a pool of sacred water, as it is the case at Saidaiji or Tōdaiji. When the cult of Avalokiteśvara was developed, this particular bodhisattva was seen as a deity who protects both against fire and floods, leading the souls towards eternal liberation. It is thus easy to assume that Avalokiteśvara was considered as able to control water, using its benefic powers to bless the believers. At the same time, water, an element which already held a high significance within Japanese indigenous beliefs, turned into a medium for essence transfer: the deity could share its divine essence through water, while *kori* (“purification through water”) helped the practitioner to approach the divine.

One of the most complex rituals that involve both fire and water is the

Shuni-e from the Tōdai-ji in Nara. The *Shuni-e* is also known as *Omizutori*¹⁶ (“water-drawing”) and it has been performed each year, without interruption, since 752, the year when the statue of the Great Buddha was installed at Tōdai-ji. The main rituals extend over a period of fourteen days, from March 1st to March 14th, although until Meiji-jidai, *Shuni-e* took place from the 1st until the 14th day of the second month according to the lunar calendar. Similar to many other Japanese festivals and rituals that are conducted in the beginning of spring, *Shuni-e* represents an occasion to pray for a peaceful and bountiful year; at the same time, it is an occasion to repent for all the evil doings of the past year and purify one’s body and soul.

Eleven monks, known as *rengyōshū* (“those who make a sustained effort”, namely, performing ascetic practices) are selected to participate in the ritual and their roles are announced on December 16th of the previous year. Although the priests gather at Tōdai-ji earlier in February, on March 1st they enter the sacred precincts of Nigatsudō (one of the temples from the Tōdaiji complex), making a vow of penitence to Kannon, and begin the *hongyō* (“main ceremony”). They undertake the task of performing penitence on behalf of the humankind, for all possible sins, and pray for peace and happiness. The *Shuni-e*, with all the rituals preceding it and those concentrated during the main fourteen days, is a vast event with multiple meanings, but it is not our purpose here to offer a detailed analysis of each element. In this paper, we intend to concentrate only on the rituals involving fire and water, as these represent the focus of the chapter. *Omizutori*, as it is popularly known, has become increasingly famous during the last two or three hundred years, due to the performance of the huge torches (*taimatsu*) that are waived from the balcony of Nigatsudō towards the crowds gathered below. The ashes and cinders from those torches are seen as having magical properties, and those who are touched by them feel blessed. However, although fueled by a pre-existent belief, the practice of the giant torches is a relatively new addition to the ceremony, dating from the Edo-jidai, when the priests made an effort to attract more believers. That is why, albeit undeniably spectacular, the famous torches from Tōdai-ji do not represent the essence of the *Omizutori* ritual.

The ritual itself was established by a monk from Tōdai-ji, named Jitchū, and it includes numerous practices related to asceticism and mortification of the body: fasting, repentance six times a day, chanting of sutras and other practices that require a fair amount of physical training. Related to this, Chief Abbot Dozen Ueno from Tōdaiji remarked in an interview from 2008: “The *Shuni-e* ceremony involves a lot of active movement, and the *rengyōshū* need to have a good deal of

¹⁶ Fieldwork conducted in February~March 2010, 2011.

physical strength. But even the ‘running ceremony’ (*hashiri*), where you run through the Nigatsu Hall in the middle of the night, or the *gotai-tochi*, where you jump up and strike your right knee with a judo-like motion, has a formal beauty that is distinctively Japanese. The recitation of sutra passages has a sense of rhythm, a tempo, and makes me think that Jitchū must have had a great theatrical mind to compose such an intricate drama of prayer.¹⁷

The fact that the ritual itself contains theatrical elements is not surprising, because any sacred manifestation is also a form of entertainment, be it for the sake of the participants or for that of the deities to whom it is dedicated. Nevertheless, the principles underlying the *Shuni-e* have deep roots in the Japanese tradition and are connected to relevant beliefs about the life-giving water and the purifying fire. For example, before *hongyō* begins, another ritual, named *bekka* (“separate fire”) is performed, marking the fact that the monks and priests will begin a lifestyle that does not include the fire from the profane world. Once they enter the sacred precincts, they will only use the fire they created themselves, with a pure flint. The priests who participate for the first time in the *Shuni-e* will enter the *bekka* hall on February 15th, while the veterans will join them on February 20th. The days until March 1st are seen as a kind of preparation for the life in the most sacred space of all, and minor taboos may still be broken (mostly those related to food and drink), but fire from the outside world can by no means be used. When the priests leave the *bekka* space to enter the *sōbekka*, where all the rituals will be conducted, they leave behind the remains of the sacred fire, named *sutebi* (“discarded fire”), which can be shared with the visitors, who believe in its magical and purifying properties. Yet, for the priests this fire is not pure enough and they may not come in contact with it. On March 1st, when the priests enter the *sōbekka*, at around 2:15 in the morning, in the complete darkness of the night, one of the priests lights the first fire, called *ittokubi*, from which all fires in the hall will be lit for the duration of the ceremony.

The special care and attention that surround the making and usage of fire indicate the importance it holds. During a ritual that announces the coming of spring, thus indicating renewal and rebirth, only a type of fire connected to the primordial times, a fire from the beginning of time can be summoned and used. The fire lit within the *sōbekka* is more than a ritual instrument and a daily life tool, it symbolizes a profound connection with the original creation and original purity, which are to be re-created through prayer, penitence, and, why not, magic practices.

¹⁷ T. Emoto: “Nara – 1,300 Years of Prayer and Beauty” in *KIE – Japan’s Arts & Culture*, Sekai Bunka Publishing Inc., Tokyo 2008

A variety of torches are used during the fourteen days of confinement and prayer, the ones most known to the ordinary people being the *taimatsu* – torches which are between 6 and 8 meters long, weighing about forty kilograms each. These torches were originally used as light for the priests who walked the covered pathways of Nigatsudō, having acquired in time a symbolical value.

Nowadays, ten torches are burned every day from March 1st to March 11th, and they have become emblematic for the *Shuni-e*. On March 12th, the evening before the *Omizutori* ceremony, eleven torches, each weighing about seventy kilograms, are burnt, in an impressive display of skill and dedication to the preservation of this tradition. To quote Chief Abbot Dozen Ueno again, “water and fire both have fundamental religious significance: flames consume gross human desires, while pure water cleanses the body and soul. The ritual, performed in the middle of the night from March 12 through 14, uses special torches called *dattan* that are waved with a dancelike motion to burn our gross desires away.¹⁸”

We can observe here a pattern of thought similar to the worship of Fudō Myōō – fire burns the invisible pollution, that which is hidden in the depths of the human soul. Fire also is a carrier of prayers, sometimes accompanied by written tablets that will be consumed by the flames during the *goma-taki* ceremony, and sometimes accompanied by deep penitence and the offering of a human body’s pain. The fact that purification ceremonies through fire or water usually involve a certain degree of pain is significant. In the rituals described above, the participants walked on hot coals, crossed a still burning fire, bathed in the winter sea or the almost frozen waters of a river. The *rengyōshū* emphasize their commitment to repentance, through equally toll-taking practices, such as *hashiri* (running around the main altar at an increasingly high speed during the night), *tsure-gotai* (using one’s arms to hang suspended from a wooden grid, a remarkably painful exercise) or *gotai-tochi* (throwing one’s body to the ground in an act of ritual penitence). Although less visible to the public, as its name indicates, water is at the center of *Omizutori* ceremony. During *hongyō*, the priests perform daily ablutions (*o-suigyō*) with water from the Ebisu River, in which they dip bamboo leaves with which they sprinkle the pure drops on their heads.

The chief abbot succinctly explains the importance of water: “The *Shuni-e* is also known as the *Omizutori*, or water-drawing, and as this name implies, water is drawn from the Nigatsu Hall’s well and offered to Kannon-san in the middle of the night on March 12. The traditional belief in Japan is that the cold water of winter is full of vital energy and will not go stale, and this must have led to its use in the

¹⁸ Ibid.

ritual penitence, where we wash away our defilement.¹⁹ The *Omizutori* ceremony may have its origins in the Japanese concept of *wakamizu* (“young water”), meaning water that was ritually drawn in a ritual marking the spring equinox and the beginning of the new agricultural year. The “young water” was thought to have magical properties: purifying the body and spirit, protecting against diseases and extending one’s life span. At Nigatsudō, *Omizutori* is performed during the night of March 12th towards March 13th, at around 2 o’clock in the morning, when the priests draw water from the Akainoya well situated at the base of the temple. *Omizutori* is a strictly secret ritual, and only two priests, the one fulfilling the role of *shushi* (literally, the “magician”, in other words, the priest in charge of conducting the esoteric *Omizutori* ritual) and the one acting as *dōdōshi* (“protector of the ritual hall”).

The drawn water, called *kōsui* (“fragrant water”) is placed on the *shumidan* (“main altar” in a Buddhist temple) as an offering and it will be used during the entire year for various rituals. The “fragrant water” is regarded as particularly potent in curing diseases, that is why the believers gathered in huge numbers at the temple (it is said that over two million people attended the ceremony in 2011) wait to receive scoops of the sacred water.

One may argue that in contemporary society religion has lost the importance and authority it used to have, becoming a mere show or a different kind of bedtime story. The rituals which are still performed every year (more than this, every month of every year) in Japan prove otherwise: some beliefs are deeply rooted in the soul of the community and they lie at the foundation of all the time and money consuming ceremonies that are organized to celebrate deities, to pray for happiness and safety, and to acquire magical means of protection against evil. Modern psychology emphasizes the importance of positive thinking as a means of success at any level. Likewise, we can see the believers’ desire to purify themselves with holy ashes, or sacred salt, or “fragrant young water” as another type of positive thinking. Belief, if not necessary the water, fire or salt themselves, will make some of the wishes come true, while attending the sacred rituals will contribute to the psychological regeneration (soul-renewal) of the participants.

The rich symbolism of water, fire and salt is by no means a phenomenon restricted to Japanese culture, yet one would be hard pressed to find another contemporary culture where ancient beliefs and esoteric rituals have metamorphosed into festive occasions for the community as a whole. Individual faith aside, the manner in which purification rites are still conducted in Japan indicates that tradition is still very much alive in a highly modern and

¹⁹ Ibid.

technology-oriented society.

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