

THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION IN JAPANESE FESTIVALS*

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INTRODUCTION

My concern with the historical imagination in cultural productions such as the festival, arises from the way it relates to and shapes social reality in very fundamental ways. A concept in the past which is being translated into social reality in the present provides the context for the selection and ordering of symbols, processes and principles in specific ways. All of this, of course, depends on the way a people in a given tradition *think* about their history and how this may be formulated and communicated. The Japanese, for example, appear to regard history as broad movements of *social processes and transitions*. In order to grasp the complexities involved and allow linkages to be properly understood, Japanese festival traditions employ parades and processions as important means of emphasising the significance of historical *periodisation*. Such periodisation in the Japanese festival becomes the appropriate conceptual tool for organising history into segments of social reality in which broad principles, ideas and convictions flow into each other and interact towards coherent statements of existential value.

In the African approach to historical knowledge, clear memory and fidelity of accounts are emphasised. African creative artists and freelance performers of the past who were patronised by royal courts as “intellectual historians” normally took great pains to learn the history of their societies and reproduce it memorably in their works as we find in D. T. Niane’s *Sundiata*.¹ It is no wonder then that a great deal of emphasis is placed on *performance* as a tool of memory and creativity in African cultural productions. Performance enables memory to be given free play in bridging the past, present and the future in a creative relationship of relevance.² It also provides full scope for the enactment of social reality in all its complexity, especially as a form of social and community experience. As a result, African festival traditions look at historical knowledge as an *experiential process* in which social reality is formulated in terms of its practical and aesthetic value to participants; hence the need to concretise it in symbolic terms. Such ways of thinking and perceiving history in festival traditions are important because they provide a study in creative communication³ with regard to the ordering of imaginative linkages and in the symbols and actions chosen to make them feasible.

THE ANCESTOR SYMBOL IN AFRICAN FESTIVALS

The African festival, like its Japanese counterpart, is closely associated with the past in a number of ways. While this feature may be found in some festivals of the gods and in harvest festivals, it is largely in commemorative festivals of myths, legends and historical events that the past finds specific expression. However, due to the complexity in levels of expression in the African festival, the past may be found in a variety of contexts. In Ghana, for example, there are solemn drum texts played in the context of festivals which invoke the past, recalling to memory the valiant deeds of the ancestors. In addition, elaborate verbal texts in the form of songs, poetry and libation performed by groups or individuals may be regarded as a 'charter of values' traceable to wise Ancestors of the past. Subsequently, contemporary events and actions of individuals, groups and Institutions within the society may then be evaluated on the basis of what these Ancestors had said or done.⁴ Similarly, in the *Nyau* festival of the Chewa speakers of Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique, masked figures of ancestors, animals and other nature beings annually enact the premodial conflict of man, nature and fire. The reconciliation of these forces through performed actions located in the distant past becomes a significant instrument of historical affirmation in the society.⁵ In all this complex of events and creative performances, it is the symbol of the 'past Ancestor' which assumes significant proportions in the African festival.

Indeed, for those who participate in these African festivals, the concept of the Ancestor conjures grave political, moral, philosophical and ethical consequences. First, it is in the festival that the living and the dead are seen and believed to come together to re-enact fundamental religious ideas, beliefs and convictions. In this regard, the Ancestor is projected as a symbol of moral authority and sanctioned behaviour as well as sources of social stability and order. Second, the Ancestors are perceived as 'men of ideas', 'wise men', and 'thinkers' of the society and hence creators of tradition.⁶ As the intellectual mentors of the human society and the repositories of living traditions, the Ancestors are credited with profound wisdom and superior vision, and this enables them to preside and exercise judgement over human society. From these assumptions, the festival participant in Africa is made to define his sense of continuity and stability as a social reality, and most especially as tangible principles of a historicised past. A relationship to the past through this kind of Ancestor then is bound to affect the way in which the historical imagination operates in the African festival.

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In much the same way, the crowning moment in most Japanese festivals is when a *mikoshi* of the Ancestors is carried through the street to a shrine, river, lake or sea. This is often preceded by homage on community altars where the living seek to commune with the departed. In the Chichibu *Yomatsuri* for example, the Shrine deity is regarded as "the wisest god on learning, politics and industry in Japanese ancient myth".⁷ Similarly in Osaka, the

Tenjin festival is used to "honour Michizane Sugawara (845-903), statesman, scholar and poet, who was posthumously deified as God of Tenjin and regarded as the god of literature".⁸ Thus in addition to purely religious ancestors, there are also political and intellectual ancestors in Japanese festivals.

Although the Ancestor in the Japanese festival is undoubtedly also a focus of intense intellectual, political, social and religious motivations, it can be said that the route to the historical imagination in the Japanese festival is not through the single, unifying image of the Ancestor. The past appears to exist independently of ancestral images, and it operates as an *autonomous* entity in the structure and organisation of events in the Japanese festival. Moreover, the past seems to be informed or controlled by an organising mind and imagination. What therefore seems really important about the Japanese festival in this regard are the fascinating ways in which this mind and imagination *creatively* relate to a perceived form of historical knowledge in the Japanese festival.

JIDAI MATSURI AND THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

As earlier observed, centrally placed Ancestor symbols seem to evoke the historical imagination in several African festivals. In festivals which dramatise historical events, however, this imagination may be enacted with outstanding symbols. For example, on the last day of the Mepe *Apenoto* festival in the Volta Region of Ghana, the destruction of the Akwamu kingdom in the early 18th century following incessant attacks from the Asante army of that period is elaborately dramatised on the main procession with traditional military symbols. In the same way, the *Ayerye* festival of the coastal Fante of Ghana concretises hardships encountered on their journey from the Sahara desert to their present settlements in Ghana. One such critical moment on the journey is captured in the festival through a military enactment. According to A. A. Opoku:

..... The climax arrives when the companies face each other in mock battle. One company moves to one end of the field and the other group takes its position at the other end. At a given signal, the warriors begin to advance. They crawl on their stomachs and fire volleys from their muskets which are of course loaded with gunpowder only. All the time that the gunmen are crawling and firing, the *Asafo* songs and drum texts continue to urge them on. The drums tell them what to do and the *Asafo* songs inspire them by revealing the brave deeds of their companies in the past.⁹

Actual battle formations are dramatised in realistic terms. In addition, creative expressions of songs and drum texts are made to further enhance this realism to the extent that there is no room for the imagination to wander, speculate or assume anything. Everything here is confined to the delineation of the actual event. Hence, actions and events are painted in realistic terms and the movement towards realism is relentless. History here is not merely recreated or commemorated but actually *enacted in full as a form of social experience*.

In contrast, the *Jidai matsuri* of Japan which also recreates history and deals exclusively

with historical knowledge seems to give full rein to the play of the historical imagination in quite decisive but different ways. In the public procession of the Nara *Kasuga Wakamiya Onmatsuri*, for example, the intention is to evoke the historic state of Nara from AD 794-1868. Hence costume impersonations of the Imperial Court, *daimyo* and *samurai* figures located in appropriate time frames are evoked as representations of the Heian (794-1192), Kamakura (1192-1333) and Edo (1603-1868) eras. All of this is done entirely in visual terms, encompassing important institutional relationships and processes. These features are linked together and depicted through performing art forms which have been developed in relation to these historic eras. As the primary focus of time, these performing art forms become the means through which these other important social institutions are perceived and presented as *episodes* and visual *narratives* on the Nara parade. The historical imagination in this context takes on the role of linking these disparate episodes and narratives into one coherent flow of history, so that they can be perceived as one meaningful process of entity.

The idea of dramatised episodes that are visually conceived and *linked* together is even more fundamental to the Kyoto *Jidai matsuri*. Described variously as “gala costume parade”, “a historical pageant” and “a moving museum of Kyoto’s history”, the festival reveals an emphasis on “the lifestyle of people in each era”.¹⁰ The time frame begins with the Meiji era (1868-1912) and goes back to the Enryaku Period of AD 782-805, appropriately called “the age of the gods”. In these depictions, the artistic lens is very fundamental. In addition to select episodes on period economic processes, historical transitions, and social developments, there is also a built-in flow of artistic developments. Hence, there are pictorial ‘narratives’ on poets, painters and artists, playwrights, writers as well as dancers and singers, detailing and recalling to memory their achievements and contributions through time. These vignettes are numerous or overwhelming and are woven together into a visual tapestry of processes, transitions and social developments for the benefit of participants.

A clearer view of this phenomenon can be seen in the much newer Tokyo *Jidai matsuri* started in 1989. The enactment in this festival begins from the Kamakura Period through the Meiji Era to the early Twentieth Century. There are depictions of similar historical figures, personalities and incidents from the same eras as in the Kyoto *Jidai matsuri*. The more interesting feature, however, is the significant role played by the performing arts in centralising the kind of historical imagination in the festival.

The parade itself begins with a float of musicians, consisting of flute and drum players. Thereafter, there is an overflow of period music and period dance formations that are effectively deployed to weave the various historical episodes together. We have *hayashi* music of the Heian era, *koto* and *samisen* music, solemn *taiko* drum music, modern forms of music as well as dragon dances, *shishimai* (lion) dances and Broadway revue dances. In the course of the parade, these performers often undertake significant stops and pauses and briefly dramatise their arts to public applause. This is intentionally done to express the spirit of each era at given moments of the parade. The overall effect is that these performing arts are constituted as elemental forces of coherence in the parade since they serve to depict

continuities in social progress through time. So that the emphasis in these contexts is clearly placed on the performing arts. In effect then, such parades read like historical narratives in which episodes are arbitrarily selected and presented in a chronological order through evidence of the performing arts. Everything here is aimed at a visual-artistic contemplation in which spectacle is made to acquire psychological undertones. Through a primary focus on the arts, participants are provoked into *thinking* about their common historical heritage with a view to sharing and defining a common Japanese *identity*.¹¹

PROCESSIONS AND THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

A more complex sense of the historical imagination is evoked in festivals which do not have obvious historical designs or motivations. In the Chichibu *yomatsuri* procession, for example, one is clearly fascinated by the beauty and opulence of the *yatai* and *kasaboko* floats; one is also allowed to be lost in the explosive integration of sound, light and colour against a seemingly dormant skyline of December darkness and fervent cold. The best one can say then is that perhaps this is a festival dominated by a deep-seated cultural display. Yet, it is precisely in the midst of such explosiveness of beauty and elegance evoked for us through creative means of music, dance and colour that the quiet values of the historical imagination are unfolded for the participants.

Earlier in the day, the *yatai* and *kasaboko* floats are paraded at random from the precincts of the shrine through defined routes to designated points in the city amidst music, mime and gaiety. This is purposely done to advertise the day's event but mainly to allow participants the luxury of contemplating the visual texts which adorn these floats before nightfall. The 'visual texts' are in the form of painted tapestry consisting of nature objects — birds, animals, flowers, sea and river life — and mythological figures. In addition to harbouring significant little stories of their own in the social memory, these visuals are conceived as specific values that are held dear by the society. There are, for example, embossed pictures of flying cranes, swimming turtles and carps climbing up a waterfall, all of which stand for long life and abundant success; we have *botan* flowers to remind us of the eternal beauty of womanhood, while dragon figures reflect the continuities implied in human fertility. There is also the symbol of *shojo*, a deliberately distorted, monkey-faced figure from Chinese folklore which is designed to discourage drunkenness as a social ideal. The point is that these embossed figures represent *fixed* ideas and values. Hence through this kind of fixity, here again made more tangible by a visual tapestry, these ideas and values are made to acquire the *permanence* of unalterable principles for those who contemplate them.

A similar situation may also be observed in the main parade in the Kyoto *Gion matsuri* known as the *Yamaboko Junko*. Compared to the handful of floats in the Chichibu *yomatsuri*, there are a total of thirty two floats in the *Gion matsuri* procession. These floats are in two main forms, the larger-than-life *yama* floats which are fewer in number and the predominant *boko* floats which are usually carried on the shoulder like *mikoshis*. While the *boko* floats carry

abstract nature symbols such as the sun, moon, stars, leaves and flowers on long poles which often jut far into the sky, the floats of the *yama* are within human gaze and carry real-life depictions of earthly situations and beings. Similarly, while both floats may be decorated with art masterpieces and tapestries drawn from ancient world civilisations as side attractions, each float also carries depictions that are steeped in ancient Japanese folklore, myths and legends. Altogether, we are given a *spread* of the historical evolution of Japanese civil society from antiquity and a sense of the cherished ways of life that have evolved as a result.

The more interesting thing is that these depictions are formulated in both abstract and real-life symbols, the latter replete with appropriate costumes, props and regalia as well as postures which readily evoke the stories and episodes known to be associated with them. In the process, the abstract-reality contrast is dissolved and reformulated in the performance of dramatic pauses, drum and flute music, mime and voiced sounds. In this context, the whole parade is thus transformed into *visual narratives* in which history, as it were, seems to be clearly organised as a creative expression and vividly brought to life by creative performance.

In much the same way, an observer may not also readily associate any kind of history with the *riku-togyo* or Land Procession of the Osaka *Tenjin matsuri*. This is on account of the dominating mass formations of synchronised choreography and rhythm, metal sounds and coordinated shouts, mass flutes, drums and wooden clappers, costume and colour, massed umbrellas, fans and institutional props and regalia. Altogether, one gets the impression of collective gaiety and intense social celebration. A closer look at the parade, however, reveals that something more significant is on display. It soon becomes obvious that certain institutions have been carefully selected, organised and arranged in a certain order to reveal important underlying principles and objectives which cement their roles and relationships in the society.

These institutions in the order of the parade cover the family, politics and religion. There is first, an elaborate evocation of the social family through the dramatisation of phases of human growth. This is done entirely in terms of female life cycles, from childhood, adolescence, marriage, motherhood and grandparenthood. Each phase is carefully emphasised through prolonged acts of music, group choreography, verbal shouts, costume, colour and props. An entire life-span in society, covering decades of human growth, is therefore dramatised as critical life cycles, and enacted from female gender perspective. Second, this sense of enactment is sharply contrasted with a panoply of "institutional narratives" in the form of key historical figures, major political developments, and socio-religious foundations framed in time perspectives. One gets the impression that the 'narrative' is done in rapid succession, although each institution is depicted differently through time frames which constantly shift from the past to the present. These different eras are skilfully shaded into various sections of the parade in no particular order to give the impression of overlapping but distinct historical periods. The crowning moment arrives however when a *mikoshi* is carried as the final act of the Land procession. This ultimate symbol seems to concretise the *timelessness* of all the events on the parade put together. So that although the episodes and narratives

associated with the selected institutions are framed in historical terms, the acts and events associated with them are at the same time invested with historical meaning and signification.

Our next example, a short one, concerns the significance of performing art forms in the *Kasuga Wakamiya On-matsuri* of Nara. In some important locations of the festival, a number of historic dances and plays are performed. In the main, these dances consist of *kagura*, *bugaku*, *dengaku*, *seino* and *sarugaku*. Some of their themes reflect "the age of the gods", some deal with metaphysical issues, while others pray for good harvest, peace and victory in war. In reality, however, they are now valued for their sheer representations of antiquity, for these dances have been performed in their pristine forms continuously for more than 850 years. Others, like the *kagura*, are of ancient Japanese origin associated with cardinal myths in the *Kojiki*. *Dengaku* is known to have emerged from ancient agricultural practices and became the forerunner of the cherished *No* theatre while *bugaku* was borrowed from the Asian continent and domesticated to reflect Japanese sensibility. So that although these dance forms dramatise their appropriate stories through movement, costume and poses, their ultimate discourses quite clearly focus on their collective antiquity and their ability to continue unchanged to the present. Hence, 'antiquity' and 'continuity' are the values evoked for us in the context of creative elements and offered to participants as cumulative historical evidence with distinct underlying principles of continuity and stability.

CONCLUSION

It can be said then that while the historical imagination in African festivals is built around ancestral images, that of Japanese festivals is built around select episodes and narratives intensely harmonised in exclusive creative contexts. Also, while the historical imagination in both festival traditions *conceptualises* and *concretises* at the same time, there is a greater tendency in the African festival tradition to embrace realism as a mode of communicating structured events while the Japanese festival embraces conceptualisation as a means of highlighting principles, ideas and values relating to historical situations. Because of this fundamental element of conceptualisation, the historical imagination in Japanese festivals plays the role of a *centralising* agency, focusing on significant processes and transitions in order to formulate a unity of perception to festival events.

In this context, the average Japanese participant is made to regard himself as part of a continuing process of historical definition. This enables him to define his individual as well as collective humanity from that perspective. Indeed, not only is he made aware of a past in which phases of social definition coincide with present self-awareness, but equally important, he is made synonymous with a sense of order, place and time in which specific ideas, values and convictions are commonly upheld as being very Japanese. It is such drive towards *particularisation* in a fluid and wider historical context which makes the historical imagination in Japanese festivals a very significant element.

Notes

- * A paper presented at the Kyoto Conference on Japanese Studies jointly sponsored by The International Research Center for Japanese Studies and The Japan Foundation in Kyoto, Japan, from October 17-22, 1994.
- 1 D. T. Nians, 1965. *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, trans. G. D. Pickett. London: Longman. See also Harold Scheub's extensive article on "A Review of African Oral Traditions and Literature" in *African Studies Review*, vol. 28 nos. 2/3, June/September 1985. pp 1-71.
 - 2 A related view is discussed under "Performance, Tradition, and Text" in Jan Vansina, 1988, *Oral Tradition as History*. London: James Curry. pp 33-56.
 - 3 This concept is discussed in two of my articles, namely, "The Aesthetics of Creative Communication in African Performance Situations", *Research Review NS*, vol. 4: 1, 1988. pp 1-9; and "The Philosophy of Communication in Traditional Ghanaian Society: The Literary and Dramatic Evidence", *Research Review NS*, vol. 5: 2, 1989. pp 52-59.
 - 4 K. E. Agovi, "A King is not Above Insult: The Politics of Good Governance in Nzema Avudwene Festival Songs" in *The Literary Griot: International Journal of Black Oral and Literary Studies*. Vol. 3: 1, Spring 1991. pp 1-18. See also B. Blackmun & M. Schofeleer, "Masks of Malawi" in *Africa Arts*, vol. v: 4, 1972. p 36.
 - 5 This is dealt with at some length in Mapopa Mtonga's unpublished M. A. Thesis, *The Drama of Gule Wamkulu* submitted to The Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, in 1980, pp 114-117.
 - 6 This is discussed in K. E. Agovi, "A King is not Above Insult", in *The Literary Griot*, vol. 3: 1, 1991. pp 7-8.
 - 7 See the introductory remarks in English of the Official Festival Brochure issued by the Chichibu City Council in 1992.
 - 8 Helen Bauer and Sherwin Carlquist, 1965: *Japanese Festivals*. Charles E. Tuttle Company: Tokyo. p 25
 - 9 This is extensively discussed in A. A. Opoku, 1970: *Festivals of Ghana*. Ghana Publishing Corporation: Tema. p 42.
 - 10 I am indebted to a feature article, "Picturesque Jidai Matsuri in Kyoto" which appeared in the *Tour Companion*, vol. 20: 23, 4 October, 1992. Tokyo News Service Ltd: Tokyo. pp 2-3.
 - 11 This theme is further explored in an earlier article on "Communication Discourse in Japanese Festivals" in *Transactions of the International Conference of Orientalists in Japan*, No XXXVIII, 1993. The Toho Gakkai: Tokyo. pp 44-54.