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## Kyoto's Gion festival: a *longue-durée* history of patronage, piety, and play

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### ABSTRACT

The Gion festival of Kyoto has a relatively well-documented history of more than a millennium. This article uses historical sources to investigate the dynamic between patronage, piety, and play diachronically, from a *longue durée* perspective. Political and economic patronage took radically different forms in subsequent stages of the festival's development. Surviving sources offer more insight into structures of patronage than into piety and are even more terse when it comes to play, but even with these limitations, it is clear that shifts in patronage have had a defining impact on both. Vice versa, both piety and play have generated renewed patronage, at times inspiring concerted action to revive the festival or prevent it from collapsing. Kyoto's Gion festival offers a unique archive that allows us to study how historical circumstances have shifted the dynamic between political and economic patronage, piety, and play in one of Japan's most influential festivals.

### KEYWORDS

Gion festival; Kyoto; float festivals; *mikoshi*; Enryakuji; Gozu Tennō

As discussed in the introduction of this issue, religious festivals (in Japan called *sairei* 祭礼 or *matsuri* 祭り) are forged in an ever-shifting crossfire of forces. This is only to be expected, because such festivals are typically supported by a great number of actors with widely divergent agendas, ranging from figures of political or economic power to priests, performers, revellers, pilgrims, and curious onlookers – not to mention bureaucrats, media reporters, police officers, street vendors, gangs, and more. As public events that involve such a great variety of people, festivals are as complicated as the societies that foster them. Different actors may pursue their interests side by side, or one group may assert its authority by pushing others into the margins. Less powerful groups may ignore most of the festival while attaching great importance to particular events that others avoid. All this makes festivals such an exceedingly rich field of study.

These already ungraspable events become all the more elusive when we add the dimension of time. Even performances that are executed in strict adherence to ancient models go through radical transformations as their historical context changes. When a practice that was once begun by warriors, guild merchants, or prostitutes is revived

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by, say, a group of shrine parishioners, it may retain its old look but its function and meaning will be entirely new. Festivals with long histories have survived many upheavals. As worldviews have changed, the festival's relevance has become moot – not once, but multiple times. Funding systems have collapsed, sponsors have disappeared, and the social structures on which the festival's organisation has depended have unravelled. At times, such festivals have been destroyed and reinvented after decades of disruption, often changed almost beyond recognition; and yet they are still here. Their frequent deaths and resurrections provide an ideal lens to study the dynamics that influence a festival's fate.

In this issue, we focus on the triad of patronage, piety, and play. These three concepts highlight different aspects of the kind of festivals discussed here. Patronage refers to the pursuit of prestige, power, blessings, or socio-economic gain by various means – financial, material, or performative. Piety looks to religious beliefs and devotional fervour as a motivation for participation in the festival. Play, finally, points at the sheer excitement and emotional involvement that festivals create, and also at role-play – the practice of acting 'as if' by assuming a non-quotidian role and adopting a particular persona. It is worth noting that these three concepts describe aspects of festival behaviour that cannot be directly identified with (let alone limited to) specific groups of actors. Patrons, priests, and revellers may all seek prestige, express their devotion to the gods, and enjoy their own ways of playing, all at the same time. Some patrons (or priests, for that matter) may in fact not care about either prestige, money, or religion, participating simply because they enjoy the festival, or willy-nilly because of social obligations – while feeling differently about it in the following year. The back-and-forth between these three aspects cannot be analysed as power play between patrons, believers, and players, because these are often the same people. That is not to say that patronage, piety, and play cannot get in each other's way. Money, gods, and games have their own places in the proceedings, and sometimes they must be kept apart.

This article investigates crucial watersheds in the history of the famous Gion festival of Kyoto from a *longue durée* perspective. I have written about this history in more detail (Teeuwen 2023), but here I seek to dissect the same material from a different angle. My aim is to test the hypothesis that changing dynamics between patronage, piety, and play have formed the festival at different stages of its development, from its tenth-century beginnings until the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and beyond. The historical record that gives us glimpses of the festival's premodern history consists overwhelmingly of elite records, from court or temple chronicles to the diaries of nobles and warrior leaders (Teeuwen 2022). This has led cautious historians (e.g., Kawauchi Masayoshi) to stress the agency of political patrons, while scholars from the tradition of Japanese ethnology (e.g., Yamaji Kōzō) feel freer to suggest undocumented interpretations focusing primarily on piety.<sup>1</sup> Can a more balanced model of interaction between patronage, piety, and play help us understand why this festival (and, likely, many similar ones around the country) underwent some of the transformations that are knowable to us from the historical record?

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<sup>1</sup>Both these authors have published many books and articles on the Gion festival. For examples, see Kawauchi (2007) and Yamaji (2009). Ueki (2001) follows a more balanced approach.

## The Gion festival

Let us start with a brief introduction to the festival as it appears today.<sup>2</sup> Kyoto's Gion festival is among Japan's largest festivals, attracting up to a million visitors. It revolves around the notion that the three gods who usually reside in Yasaka Shrine, on the eastern outskirts of Kyoto, take up temporary residence in the centre of the city. The gods are transported to their 'travel quarters' (*otabisho* 御旅所) in three elaborately decorated palanquins (*mikoshi* 神輿), carried on the shoulders of large groups of men. Departing in the afternoon, the palanquins circle the city by different routes, arriving at their destination late at night. They stay in the *otabisho* for a week, arriving on 17 July and returning on the 24th.

On the days that the gods are moved, parades of large floats take place in the morning. There are twenty-three floats on the 17th and eleven on the 24th. The floats pass by the *otabisho*, but do not cross the Kamo River to approach Yasaka Shrine. They are set up by the inhabitants of 'float streets' (*yamahoko-chō* 山鉾町) in the southern half of historic Kyoto, the area that is closely connected to Yasaka Shrine. The floats come in different shapes. Most spectacular are the *hoko* 鉾 ('halberds'), large carts weighing eight to twelve tons, built around a central mast that reaches a height of up to twenty-five meters from the ground. The *hoko* carry groups of musicians seated on an elevated platform, who play flutes, hand-cymbals and small drums. In the front sits a *chigo* 稚児 or 'divine child.' In all but one of the *hoko* these children have been replaced by dolls; the remaining 'living *chigo*' makes solemn gestures at significant moments. The *hoko* are moved by teams of pullers, manning two ropes. At apparently random intervals, blocks of wood are placed under the wheels to make the masts sway. More numerous than the *hoko* are smaller floats called *yama* ('hills'). These are decorated platforms that use a standard combination of a hill (made of woven bamboo strips covered with cloth) and a tree. In this 'landscape' are placed figurines, mostly displaying famous scenes from Japanese or Chinese lore. The first parade also has two *kasa* 傘 ('parasols' fixed onto small carts), accompanied by musicians and 'stick-twirling' dancers, as well as multiple *chigo*. All floats, large or small, are decorated with exquisite materials, reflecting the fact that Lower Kyoto was once dominated by textile merchants (Figure 1).

Around this framework of palanquin processions and float parades, numerous smaller rituals stretch out from the beginning of July until the last day of that month. The palanquins are cleansed on the 10th; this involves an elaborate 'lantern parade' that attracts large crowds. Late at night on the 15th, priests move the gods from the shrine hall into the palanquins; they are returned to the shrine on the 24th. The float streets have their own rituals, connected to the setting up, the first pulling, and the disassembly of the floats, while other rites relate to the handling of the figurines. On the days before the parades, the floats and their treasures are displayed to the public. Large crowds of viewers wander around the float streets, many dressed in traditional *yukata*. They listen to the float musicians, admire the float displays, offer a coin and a prayer to the figurines, and enjoy the general bustle. The three *mikoshi* have separate associations of bearers, each with its own ritual schedules. The official end of the Gion festival is on

<sup>2</sup>For more on the modern festival, see Brumann (2012), Porcu (2020) and Teeuwen (2020, 2021).



**Figure 1.** The floats parade in 2017. The floats with soaring masts down the street are *hoko*, and the lower ones closer to the camera are *yama*. Wikimedia Commons.

31 July, when people are invited to pass through a ring of bamboo grass at Yasaka Shrine and receive amulets that protect against illness.

In its present version, the festival contains many layers of patronage, piety, and play. Kyoto City and Kyoto Prefecture, which give subsidies to the preservation associations that run the floats and supply such services as policing, are particularly important, because their support lays down the groundwork that makes the festival possible. The order of the floats is decided by the drawing of lots in Kyoto City Hall in the presence of the mayor, who embodies the city's patronage. Most funding, however, is raised from private sources. Shopkeepers exhibit evidence of their patronage in their businesses, and others display their clearly labelled offerings at the *otabisho*. Piety, or at least prayer, is expressed at the shrine, the *otabisho*, and around the floats and palanquins. Play takes the form of costumed role-play, tourism, consumption, and many a romantic rendezvous along the riverbank. In its modern setting, the festival receives public support because of the secular benefits that it brings to the city, while care is taken to reserve space both for prayer and play – a difficult balancing act that breaks down when tourists disturb rituals or when ritualists lose their patience with rowdy onlookers. Since the 1930s at least, traditionalists have protested that the festival should not be allowed to lose its true character as an expression of pious prayer and deteriorate into a mere spectacle for tourists (Yasaka Jinja 1923, 156–160); retaining this balance remains an ongoing struggle.

Many of these dynamics appear as quintessentially modern: the secular context of the Japanese state, the subsidies, the influx of tourists, and more. The friction between the interests of patronage, piety, and play, however, is not new. How has this tension been handled in earlier phases of the festival's history? Below, I will sketch the main

changes in the festival's format in six phases, with a focus on the ways in which this tension has manifested itself.

### Phase 1 (970s–1150s): the court as the pacifier of the spirits of pestilence

In its first phase, the festival was structured around three dates: the seventh, the fourteenth, and the fifteenth days of the lunar sixth month. On the seventh, three palanquins carried the gods of the Gionsha 祇園社 ('Jetavana Shrine,' the name of Yasaka Shrine until 1868) to one, and later two *otabisho* west of the Kamo River.<sup>3</sup> This event was called 'welcoming the palanquins' (*mikoshi mukae* 神輿迎). The three palanquins carried the main deity, called Tenjin 天神 (Deva) or, later, Gozu Tennō 牛頭天王 (the Ox-Headed Deva King); his wife; and their eight 'princes' – or, according to others, Gozu Tennō's concubine. Gozu Tennō, a deity not found in any canonical Buddhist sources, was said to be a king from northern India who had the power to unleash epidemics, while sparing his devotees and their descendants.<sup>4</sup>

In the few surviving sources, however, it is not the arrival of these gods in the city that appears as the festival's highlight. Court diarists focus almost exclusively on the fourteenth and fifteenth. On the fourteenth, the palanquins returned to the Gionsha. This was referred to as the Gion *goryōe* 御霊会 – Gion's 'gathering for [the appeasement of] wrathful spirits.' The palanquins were accompanied by an elaborate parade orchestrated by the imperial court, whose palace and administrative apparatus dominated the city. Selected nobles were ordered to dispatch extravagantly decked-out horse riders, each accompanied by an escort of flashy retainers. Groups of dancers and musicians, some formed by nobles themselves and others hired or sponsored by them, also became a prominent part of the *goryōe* procession. On the fifteenth, official offerings were presented at the Gionsha by an imperial envoy. On this day nobles sponsored court dances and horse races at the shrine. The procedures on the fifteenth were referred to as 'interim rites' (*rinjisai* 臨時祭) also after they had become an annual event. In diaries, the *rinjisai* stands out as the festival's celebratory climax (Wakita 2016, 24–57) (Figure 2).

The 970s were a decade of particularly virulent epidemics. *Goryōe* festivals had emerged a century earlier as a response to such disasters. The earliest *goryōe* appear to have been spontaneous events, initiated locally rather than under the auspices of the imperial court. Pestilence deities were invoked to ritual sites, moved into palanquins and flushed down the river; or such palanquins were carried over long distances towards the capital in what appears to have been riotous outbreaks of discontent as much as rites of exorcism. Some *goryōe* also involved armed horse racing and other displays of military skill, adding to their potential of triggering violence. The Gionsha originated as one of multiple shrine-temples (*miyadera* 宮寺) built to appease such pestilence deities by Buddhist means; fittingly, it was located near the city's largest charnel grounds.

<sup>3</sup>The Ōmandokoro was moved to its present location on Shijō street in 1591 on Toyotomi Hideyoshi's orders. The Shōshōi was merged with it. Small shrines remain on the sites of the old Ōmandokoro and the Shōshōi today.

<sup>4</sup>For more on these deities, see Suzuki (2019) and Faure (2021).



**Figure 2.** One of the Gionsha *mikoshi*. The *mikoshi* is accompanied by guards on horseback; these are not the more elaborate horse riders mentioned above. The atmosphere is strikingly festive, but some onlookers appear to avert their eyes from the *mikoshi*. *Nenjū gyōji emaki* (a seventeenth-century copy of a late-twelfth-century original). National Diet Library digital archive.

Already in the ninth century, the court sought to gain control over *goryōe* by organising its own grand performances, supervising established local *goryōe*, and banning new ones (Kubota 1974, 59–84; McMullin 1988). In an era when all sorts of calamities and anomalies were seen as otherworldly responses to the conduct of the ruler, there was more at stake than the mere prevention of mob rioting. The ability to control the invisible realm, with its teeming deities and demons, was a central responsibility of the imperial court and the ultimate test of its legitimacy. The leading nobles, therefore, did not approve of outsiders intruding on their self-proclaimed monopoly in this field.

Yet there was always plenty of intrusion going on. Neither the Gionsha nor the *otabisho* were court institutions. The Gionsha was a branch of the powerful Enryakuji temple complex on Mt Hiei, an 800-metre high mountain on the north-eastern rim of Kyoto. The first *otabisho* originated as the city residence of a ‘wealthy man’ – an early trader, perhaps. According to a legend (which, admittedly, is first recorded in a fifteenth-century legal document), the Gionsha gods expressed their wish to travel to

this site in the city by way of an oracle; the original owner and his descendants were to serve as their priests for the duration of their stay (Seta 2009, 354–363). In spite of court pretensions, then, the festival involved multiple groups of actors from the very start. There were the shrine monks of the Gionsha, closely linked to the Enryakuji temple complex; the merchant priests of the *otabisho*; and the court nobility. Court diaries, our main source, tell us nothing about goings-on at the *otabisho*, nor are we able to glean much of the monks' perspective.

There are a few telling incidents, however, that reveal early tensions. In 999, a performer of some fame who was popularly known as 'No Bones' (Mukotsu 無骨) appeared in front of the Gionsha on the day of the *goryōe*.<sup>5</sup> Mukotsu brought a contraption that reminded the court's hegemon, Fujiwara Michinaga (966–1028), of a symbol of imperial authority. Michinaga ordered for Mukotsu to be arrested, but the performer had already fled. Even worse, Michinaga's interference apparently enraged the deities. A priest fell off the worshipping stage, and the main deity, Tenjin, took possession of a 'lowly person' through whom he delivered a menacing oracle. That same night a fire broke out in the palace, burning it down to the ground. Presumably, some patron had paid Mukotsu to stage his performance. Considering Michinaga's reaction, he must have regarded this patron as an enemy. It is striking that the court chronicle reporting this incident implies that the patron had Tenjin on his side.

This episode (and a similar one in 1013) reveals that the festival was not under the full control of its most powerful patrons – the court elite – but also had space for others. Among those would be the commoners who had invited the Gionsha deities into their streets in the first place. In 1085, an imperial consort died soon after the festival; her death was blamed on that fact that the emperor had stayed in the southern half of the city at a time when the palanquins were being moved.<sup>6</sup> Events from the seventh until the fourteenth appear to have been seen as off-limits to court diarists, who shunned this part of the festival as a source of dangerous pollution. Our reliance on their writings can easily tempt us to give undue weight to court-orchestrated proceedings on the fourteenth and the fifteenth (*goryōe* and *rinjisai*). It is all too easy to forget that these acts of patronage were a politically inspired overlay; what happened in the festival at other times and places we simply do not know. The procession of the palanquins to the *otabisho* and the week they spent there may have remained a free zone for commoners' piety and play, purposefully left untouched by the imperial court.

## Phase 2 (1150s–1320s): Enryakuji and the horse-chief duty

A second phase began when the court was caught up in internal strife in the twelfth century. As tensions between court factions escalated, imperial patronage of the Gion festival lost some (though certainly not all) of its significance. The court now abandoned its earlier monopolistic stance and allowed other actors to assume the role of co-patrons. In 1157, Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa extended an already existing system of raising funds to the Gion festival, by granting three 'sickle halberds' (*kamahoko* 鎌鉾) to the Gionsha's 'shrine lineages' (*shake* 社家) – a term that likely included both the Gionsha

<sup>5</sup>*Honchō seiki* 本序世紀, entry 14.6.999. Koyama (2013, 626).

<sup>6</sup>*Chōshūki* 長秋記, entry 17.6.1135. Gomi (1984, 357).



monks and the priests of the *otabisho*. Every year, these halberds were assigned to ‘rich houses in the city,’ who were then obliged to pay a charge called the ‘horse-chief levy’ (*bajōyaku* 馬上役).<sup>7</sup>

The horse-chief levy brought the festival into a new landscape of patronage. The central player was Kyoto’s most influential temple complex, the aforementioned Enryakuji. Perched on the high slopes of Mt Hiei, Enryakuji was strategically located along the trade routes to Lake Biwa and the Sea of Japan. As we have seen, Enryakuji was the head temple of the Gionsha, as well as other shrine-temples within the city boundaries. Both Enryakuji itself and its subordinate temples and shrines around the city had their own human and economic base in the form of households called ‘people in the service of the gods’ (*jinin* 神人). These *jinin* owed taxes and corvée labour to their temple/shrine overlords, which even held exclusive judicial powers over them.

In the twelfth century, Enryakuji expanded its reach by dominating a newly emerging form of commerce: monopolised trade by merchant guilds. *Jinin* set themselves up as merchants; or merchants assumed the status of *jinin*. In return for privileged access to business opportunities, raw materials, and transport routes, guild members owed goods and services to Enryakuji as their overlord, protector, and enforcer. A large part of this business was moneylending, using the proceeds from the Enryakuji’s many estates as capital (Gay 2001). Soon, no city merchant could trade without enrolling in Enryakuji’s network.

The practice of imposing horse-chief duty on ‘rich houses’ had in fact been pioneered by Enryakuji in the context of another festival called Kosatsuki-e 小五月会 (‘lesser gathering of the fifth month’), which was renowned for its horse races.<sup>8</sup> The Kosatsuki-e was an event of Enryakuji’s own tutelary shrine complex, the Hie Shrines on Mt Hiei’s eastern slope. Here, the bulk of the horse-chief duty takings went to semi-military ‘guards’ (*gego* 外護, *katōdo* 方人) loyal to Mt Hiei (Shimosaka 2001, 244–252). Such guards were used to defend the interests of Enryakuji and its guilds. On numerous occasions, Enryakuji monks and their lay subordinates carried the palanquins of the Hie Shrines and the Gionsha into the city, threatening to unleash the powers of the gods on their enemies (Adolphson 2000). At times, power holders raised troops that fought pitched battles to stop these palanquins from crossing the Kamo River. The Gionsha presided over the services of an outcaste community (*inu* or ‘dog’ *jinin* 犬神人) that was closely connected to the charnel grounds and the lepers’ settlement east of this river. These people were closely involved with the palanquin attacks, and their presence made the Gionsha a key base of Enryakuji power in the city.

The second phase of the festival saw a significant shift, with the court retreating and Enryakuji gaining ground. The extravagant palanquin processions of the early eleventh century dwindled away. There were now fewer horse riders and groups of dancers, while the presence of *jinin* linked to Enryakuji and the Gionsha increased. The palanquins took on a military guise, with trains of armed *jinin*. The commoner merchants, some of whom must have belonged to the communities around the *otabisho*, were now tied to the Enryakuji complex in new ways. When they participated in the festival,

<sup>7</sup>*Shake jōjō kiroku* 社家条々記録 (*Gion shigyō nikki* 祇園執行日記 9), *Yasaka jinja kiroku* 1: 587. On the horse-chief levy, (see Seta 2009, 370–396; Wakita 2016, 58–72).

<sup>8</sup>*Hyakurenshō* 百練抄, entry 29.4.1138. (Shimosaka 2001, 261, note 1).

they did so as members of the Enryakuji empire; the court's older claim on the festival as its main patron and as the controller of demonic forces must have lost much of its impact. Meanwhile, we still know very little about any events that may have taken place at the *otabisho*. The partial devolution of patronage through the horse-chief duty system may well have created more room for autonomous involvement by commoners, who were to emerge as the festival's most prominent actors in the next phase.

### Phase 3 (1320s–1467): float parades and shogunal viewings

The third phase was marked by changes both in the format of the festival and in its relation to power. In the early fourteenth century, the horse riders and dancers who had accompanied the palanquins in the first two phases disappeared. They were for a while joined – and gradually replaced – by ‘halberd groups’ (*hokoshū* 鉾衆), drummers and dancers milling around a halberd: a pole, topped by an ornamental blade, that stood upright in a strongman's belt. These groups not only accompanied the palanquins but also made their own way through the city, at times getting caught up in fights. Halberd groups are mentioned first in the context of the Gion festival (in 1321); in subsequent decades they became a central ingredient of most festivals around the city.<sup>9</sup> It is unclear how these groups relate to the pre-existing ‘sickle halberds’ of the horse-chief duty and to the later *hoko* floats.

A diary entry dated 1345 notes that ‘hill floats (*yama*) and other contraptions (*tsukurimono* 造物)’ were paraded through the streets separately from the palanquins.<sup>10</sup> These *yama* were the direct ancestors of today's floats. One imagines that the ‘contraptions’ included other types of decorated floats or portable objects, likely accompanied by costumed dancers and musicians. The development of separate parades of *hoko* halberds, *yama* floats, and other unspecified ‘contraptions’ accelerated after 1369. In that year, the palanquins were lost in a conflict between Enryakuji and the new Zen temple of Nanzenji, which was closely associated with the Ashikaga shoguns – the new military hegemons who had made Kyoto their home in the 1330s (Adolphson 2000, 307–315). Enryakuji demanded that the shogunate must cover the costs of replacing the destroyed palanquins, with the result that the festival had to make do without palanquins for more than a decade. This crisis appears to have spelled the end for the last classical horse riders and groups of dancers, and marked the rise of the new float parades.

In the course of the 1370s and 1380s, the Ashikaga shoguns and their closest warlord allies replaced the court as the festival's main patrons. Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408) made it an almost annual routine to put himself on display in a pavilion along the route of the parade for a formal ‘viewing’ (*kenbutsu* 見物). This inspired the merchant sponsors of the floats to outdo each other with extravagant designs. At this stage, the floats were conceived, constructed, and manned (oftentimes using hired performers) by merchant guilds. In the course of the fifteenth century, shogunal viewings grew into a ceremonial demonstration of warrior control over the city (Futaki 1985; Kawauchi 2012, ch. 1 and 2). The march of the shogunal convoy to the viewing pavilion almost rivalled the parades themselves. The float designs catered to the tastes of the

<sup>9</sup>Hanazono *Tennō shinki* 花園天皇宸記, entry 24.7.1321; (Ueki 2001, 57–65).

<sup>10</sup>Moromori *ki* 諸守記, entry 8.6.1345; (Ueki 2001, 60).

Ashikaga house. Many celebrated heroic acts of the shoguns' forebears (the Minamoto), and an even larger number drew on a new art form that was now finding favour among the warlord elite: Noh song and dance. In some years, the shogun sponsored his own cart (*kusemai-guruma* 久世舞車), carrying favoured performers who sang 'congratulatory songs' (*gaka* 賀歌). In the shadow of these parades the palanquin processions lost some of their prominence, while the imperial *rinjisai* died a quiet death.

The shogun's growing power put pressure not only on the court but also on Enryakuji and its network. Breaking Enryakuji's grip on Kyoto was one of the shogunate's more urgent policy goals. In 1385, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408) replaced the Enryakuji-appointed overseer of the Gionsha with his personal 'prayer master' (*oshi* 御師); this priest's lineage would serve as Gionsha managers (*shigyō* 執行) until 1872. Then, in 1393, Yoshimitsu issued a series of laws that ended the power of temple overlords to exempt their *jinin* from shogunal taxes (Gay 2001, 81). The guild merchants of Kyoto were now no longer protected from shogunal jurisdiction, and they had to maintain good relations both with the military regime and their temple overlord.

In spite of these shogunal measures, Enryakuji retained a solid grip on the Gionsha's palanquins. Its main weapon was the horse-chief duty. This levy was revived in a new format in the 1380s, also under shogun Yoshimitsu. The horse-chief duty now became the permanent responsibility of a group of leading merchant houses known as the 'horse-chief association' (*bajō isshū* 馬上一衆). This association consisted of the largest moneylenders and financiers of the city, most of them linked in different ways to Enryakuji (Shimosaka 2001, 268–301). Its members collected contributions from hundreds of lesser businesses. Under this new system there was only one horse-chief duty, which was shared between the Hie Shrines and the Gionsha. If the horse-chief duty was not paid in full, Enryakuji sabotaged the festival by preventing the Gionsha palanquins from leaving the shrine gates. The same group of merchants who made up the horse-chief association were also responsible for collecting shogunal taxes, used to fund the shogun's Board of Retainers (*samuraidokoro* 侍所).

In this scenario, the merchants of Kyoto found themselves navigating between their old temple overlord on Mt Hiei and the newly assertive Muromachi shoguns. For some, their participation in the Gion festival was a time-honoured duty as 'service people' (*jinin*) of the Gionsha; this was particularly true of those who were involved in the palanquin processions. For others, their involvement was part of their duties as members of the powerful Enryakuji network of trade and finance. At the same time, the parades offered guild merchants a unique opportunity to display their capital (economic, social, and cultural) in front of the shogun and other leading warlords. Of course, the crowds of fellow commoners who lined the streets were also on their minds.

Was play a prominent element in this phase of the festival? The halberd groups may well have been playful; at the very least, their behaviour was not strictly circumscribed, in contrast to the later floats. Some of the float themes can perhaps be interpreted as humorous, although most were designed to impress rather than amuse; this was certainly no carnival parade. The earliest illustrations of the festival, dating from the first half of the fifteenth century, show a comically dressed man riding an ox (*ushi no nori* 乘牛, Kawauchi 2012, 261–279). This man, who would wear a ridiculously oversized version of the official garb of nobles and carry a bird on one of his sleeves, joined the second parade but also roamed the streets freely. One diarist identifies the performers as outcaste



**Figure 3.** The ox-rider and an unknown *yama* float. The heavily armed guards convey a sense of the parades' militarisation. The buckets with water carried by two women must have offered much-needed refreshment in the scorching heat of Kyoto's summer. *Tsukinami saireizu* 月次祭礼図 (fifteenth century). Shintō Taikai (1992) vol. Gion, p. 437.

'reciters' (*shōmoji* 声聞師) from the Kitabatake ghetto in the north of the city, and notes that the ox-rider made people laugh.<sup>11</sup> One wonders whether the *shōmoji* were sponsored by a patron to carry out this act. The illustration (Figure 3) derives from a ceremonial screen; perhaps the ox-rider was included because it amused the no doubt high-ranking client who ordered it.<sup>12</sup> Might the festival have contained more ludic elements of this sort, including some did not appeal so directly to elite patrons? Also, we should not forget that as before, we still have no idea what went on at the *otabisho*, or at any other venues that were beyond the horizon of shogunal chroniclers and court diarists.

#### Phase 4 (1500–1571): reconstruction in an age of chaos

In 1467, a war broke out that utterly destroyed Kyoto. Until a stalemate was reached in 1473, two huge armies took turns setting parts of the city on fire. The capital was reduced to two village-sized clusters of barricaded streets in the Upper (northern) and Lower (southern) City. Signs of recovery began to appear only in the 1490s, when there was a spell of relative stability. However, the sixteenth century was also marred by regular violence. Warlords chased each other out of the capital, farmers from the surrounding countryside raided the city in search of relief from debts and famine, and city merchants organised themselves in temple-led networks of defence, resistance, and sometimes attack. The situation stabilised first in 1573, when the warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534–82) took full control over the city (Berry 1994).

<sup>11</sup> *Sanetaka kōki* 実隆公記, entry 14.6.1501; (Kawauchi 2015, 61).

<sup>12</sup> *Tsukinami sairei zu* 月次祭礼図, 'Images of festivals in respective months,' is a set of Edo-period copies of six images from two six-panel screens that were once in the possession of the Tokugawa shoguns, and are now kept at the Tokyo National Museum. The original screens are lost.

Like all other city festivals, the Gion festival was stopped in its tracks when the fighting began in 1467; it was not revived until 1500. By that time the city had been completely transformed. The court was now powerless, and many nobles had fled to the provinces. The Gionsha had been reduced to ashes in the first year of the war. Enryakuji survived a while longer, but the horse-chief duty was no longer collected after 1470. Then, in 1493, the city was brought under temporary control by Hosokawa Masamoto (1466–1507), a strongman who served as ‘deputy’ (*kanrei* 管領) of the child-shogun Ashikaga Yoshizumi (1481–1511). This coup finally gave Kyoto some relief from constant low-intensity warfare and persuaded both merchants and nobles to return.

In the meantime, the Gion festival had become a distant memory – as had most of Kyoto’s cultural life. The festival seemed no longer relevant, now that so little was left of the sprawling city of a mere generation earlier. Yet when restoration finally began, efforts to restart the festival emerged both among commoners and among the warrior elite. The rebuilding of the Gionsha, finished in 1492, reminded Kyotoites of the potency of its gods.

In the summer of 1494, one year after Masamoto’s coup, Kyoto was hit by a wave of arson attacks and rampant illness. There were rumours that this string of disasters was ultimately caused by the deities of the Gionsha; according to an oracle, the deities had warned that the fires would not stop until the festival was restored. In an act of pious despair, and no doubt also spontaneous play, locals flocked to the Gionsha to pray and woo the deities with music and dance.<sup>13</sup> These events amounted to a spontaneous revival of the festival at the initiative of nameless people from Lower Kyoto.

This must also have put pressure on Masamoto. The *otabisho* and *mikoshi* were restored between 1496 and 1500 with funds collected by begging monks who acted with shogunal sanction. Masamoto gave orders to restart the festival already in 1496, but met with stubborn resistance from Enryakuji. Enryakuji saw in Masamoto’s urgency an opportunity for the revival of the horse-chief duty. The temple complex put severe pressure on the Gionsha not to abide by Masamoto’s wishes. To Masamoto’s chagrin, the Gionsha found Enryakuji to be the more serious threat. Then, in 1499, Masamoto decided that Enryakuji was in cahoots with his enemies and staged an all-out attack that reduced Mt Hiei to rubble. In the following year, the Gion festival was finally restored.

This time, it was not the shogun but Masamoto himself who inspected the parade from a pavilion along the route. The fact that Masamoto’s gaze was the very purpose of the parade is implied in a 1501 diary entry: ‘The floats began their parade after Lord Hosokawa had entered his pavilion.’<sup>14</sup> Five years later, however, the partially rebuilt Enryakuji again forced the Gionsha to hold back its palanquins. This time, Masamoto found a different solution. As one diarist noted, the float parade went ahead regardless of the absence of the palanquins, ‘for the sake of Lord Hosokawa Masamoto’s viewing.’<sup>15</sup> Clearly, Masamoto’s point in reviving the festival was not to move the gods. His idea was to preside over the Gion parades as a tableau of regained normalcy. It was not the

<sup>13</sup>*Gojigen'in-dono gyoki* 御慈眼院殿御記, entry 14.8.1494. On these events and their possible connection to the revival of the Gion festival, (see Hayashima 2006, 268–271; Kawauchi 2012, 199–219).

<sup>14</sup>*Tokikuni-kyō ki* 言国脚記, entry 14.6.1501; (Kawauchi 2007, 93).

<sup>15</sup>*Gohōjōji kanpaku ki* 御法成寺関白記 and *Sanetaka kō ki* 実隆公記, entry 7.6.1506; (Kawauchi 2007, 93).

presence of the gods in the *otabisho* that gave meaning to the revived festival, but Masamoto's presence in the watching pavilion.

For the warrior elite, the festival was now a symbol of restored peace and order. This symbolic function is most eloquently expressed on extravagant pairs of six-panelled screens that offer views of the city of Kyoto from a bird's eye perspective. These screens were created by court artists on orders of the most powerful warlords, including the last Ashikaga shoguns (McKelway 2006). Some were put on display in shogunal castles and residences, while others were used as gifts of diplomacy among warlords. They show exquisite details of Kyoto's cityscape, interspersed with billowing clouds of gold. Gion was the only festival to feature on these screens; it served as proof of the city's flourishing, thanks to the protection of both the military rulers and the gods.

Although elite patronage saved the festival at this crucial juncture, its revival was ultimately dependent on popular participation. Crucially, Masamoto did not pay for the restoration of the shrine, the *otabisho*, the palanquins, or the floats; his main contribution was neutralising Enryakuji. Piety and play fed patronage, and patronage inspired more piety and play. Through this process, the Gion festival won back its central position in Kyoto's city life.

### Phase 5 (1571–1868): street protocols and pleasure quarter pageants

The end of a century of war in the 1570s was one of the main watersheds of Japanese history. Of course, it also transformed Kyoto. Oda Nobunaga entered the city in 1568, removed the last Ashikaga shogun in 1573, and was killed in a Kyoto temple in 1582. Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–98), one of his generals, took over. Hideyoshi reorganised the city, drastically altering its lay-out in the manner of a fortified castle town. His rule caused the city to expand rapidly, quadrupling its population to perhaps as many as 400,000 people in a few decades. The situation changed again after Hideyoshi's death, when the new Tokugawa shoguns settled in Edo. Kyoto lost its shogun, but remained a 'second capital' due to the continued presence of the imperial court and the nobility. The Kyoto governor (*shoshidai* 所司代), appointed from Edo, served as the shogun's 'second in command.' Kyoto became a centre for the manufacture of fine crafts and textiles, traded through nation-wide commercial networks. The city enjoyed exceptional cultural prestige, even though it struggled to compete with the trading port of Osaka and the booming megalopolis of Edo.

The Gion festival, too, shed its medieval garb and entered a new era. The start of its 'early modern' transformation can be dated to 1571, when warlord Oda Nobunaga decided to remove Enryakuji from the scene once and for all. Like Masamoto seven decades earlier, Nobunaga felt that the monastic community on Mt Hiei was conspiring with his enemies. His solution was even more radical: everyone found on the mountain was massacred, and every building was torched. Enryakuji was eventually rebuilt, but its medieval power was broken. So was its influence over the Gion festival. The Gionsha now became an independent institution, without binding ties to any temple overlord. Enryakuji was no longer in a position to 'kidnap' the Gion festival as a way to put pressure on the brokers of power.

Enryakuji's fall and the introduction of a range of new policies by Hideyoshi changed the status of Kyoto's merchants. The old temple guilds made way for new networks of

trade. Hideyoshi annulled land rights of temples and shrines in the city, transforming many merchants from renters of temple land into independent owners of their own businesses. The decades of war had given rise to tight street (*chō*) communities, which had their own leaders, defences, wells, and latrines. When the city expanded again, these older streets established 'branch streets' (*edachō* 枝町) in newly developed parts of the city. There were also larger units of 'streets' associations' (*chōgumi* 町組), coordinating the actions of streets in times of crisis. Hideyoshi, and later the Kyoto governors, built on these structures to establish their own system of control over the commoner population.

Streets now served as the lowest administrative units of the city. Kyoto's streets had their own laws, taxes, and property. Street gates were closed and guarded every night. It was obligatory for all inhabitants to attend monthly meetings in street meetinghouses. Street funds were used for the maintenance of communal property, but also for social and ritual events. Streets had their own hierarchies. Only an elite of 'house owners' were regarded as full street members; renters who lived in the back alleys had obligations but were excluded from decision making and street systems of support.

Within this radically different setting, the festival once again took on a new significance. Formally, the festival was now performed on orders from the Kyoto governor, later represented by the city magistrates (*machi bugyō* 町奉行). Like the shoguns of earlier centuries, the governor installed himself along the route of the parades, though not in a pavilion but in a strategically located temple. Passing the temple of the governor and performing the float's dances under his gaze was the parade's most nervous moment for every float street. The role of official festival supervisors was performed by a special group of 'watchmen' (*zōshiki* 雑色). These watchmen handed over orders signed by the governor (later, the magistrate) to carry out the festival, first at the Gionsha and then in every street that was involved in the proceedings. They also oversaw the drawing of lots that decided the order of the floats in both parades, inspected those lots at a checkpoint along the route, and led the palanquin processions. Any irregularities in the festival (for example, a street's failure to participate due to a fire) were subject to prior approval by the watchmen (Tomii 1996).

The watchmen, moreover, derived an income from their right to oversee the festival. Streets paid the watchmen a set charge every year. The festival, then, now also served as a mechanism to fund this traditional police force. To the warrior authorities the festival was a celebration of the regime's success in maintaining peace and prosperity, as well as an instrument to fund warrior control over the city's commoner population (Figure 4).

From the viewpoint of the streets, the festival was both a burden and a source of collective pride. Different streets were involved in different ways. Float streets received support from designated 'attendant streets' (*yorichō* 寄町 – many of them old branch streets), which contributed to the festival costs by paying a set amount of rice or, more commonly, the equivalent in coin (Tomii 1971). Street members took turns organising festival tasks, which included feasting the watchmen and representatives from the attendant streets, music practice sessions, joint worship of the float figurines, speeches and communal eating and drinking, setting up the float and taking it apart again for storage, settling bills – and more. Renters were obliged to help out, while house owners acted as managers, raised funds, dealt with the watchmen, hired pullers,



**Figure 4.** The watchmen pass down orders to perform the festival. *Gion goryōe saiki* 祇園御霊会細記 (1757). Ritsumeikan University Art Research Center.

basked in the glory of their float and suffered the consequences of float damage by rain or fire. The social dynamics within the float streets mirrored inequalities of status and economic power. Many streets were dominated by a few, or even a single trading house, whose owners took the front seat in the proceedings; others had residents of more equal standing and used the festival as a joint undertaking that fostered cooperation and solidarity.

A smaller group of designated streets was charged with moving the palanquins. These streets (called ‘beam streets,’ *nagaechō* 轆町, after the beams used to carry the palanquins) used their designated task in a manner similar to the float streets. House owners held worship sessions where offerings were made to the beams stored in the meetinghouse, and positioned themselves along the route to cheer on the year’s bearers, hired through contractors. They feasted the watchmen, received contributions from attendant streets, and settled bills in much the same way as the float streets (Nishiyama 2017).

The Gionsha, meanwhile, had a surprisingly limited role in the festival. It was involved in rituals related to the palanquins, notably moving the shrine’s deities into their palanquins and back into their shrine abode. A few leading priests joined the palanquin processions to and from the *otabisho*. The *otabisho* (now located in a single site) were in this period run by a Gionsha appointee, and ritual activity there was much reduced. Representatives from the float and beam streets made formal visits, but overall, the festival happened elsewhere.

A striking new trend in the float streets was the transformation of the floats, and also the beams used for carrying the palanquin, into sacred objects of worship in their own



right. Float figurines, in particular, gained divine status (Murakami 2010). This status was marked in various ways. The figurines were installed in miniature shrines and special powers were ascribed to them. Streets appointed ‘figurine wardens’ (*ningyōban* 人形番) from among their members, charged with handling these sacred statues. Streets distributed printed sheets explaining their powers and sold amulets for particular benefits, ranging from safe births to fire prevention. For many, the main gods of the festival were now the figurines in the float streets, rather than, or at least in addition to, the Gionsha deities.

The most striking transfiguration of the festival, however, was the addition of an entirely new cluster of events, staged in a new area: the rapidly developing ‘amusement district’ that was built in the late seventeenth century between the Gionsha and the eastern bank of the Kamo River. After a new embankment had been constructed in 1670, this area, which had been a flood-prone ghetto of outcasts, beggars, and lepers, grew into the largest theatre-and-brothel area of the city within a few decades. Fittingly, it was called Gion.

The opening for this district’s entry into the festival was provided by rather anonymous rites related to the palanquins. On the last day of the fifth month, one of the palanquins was carried down to the river and ‘washed’ (*mikoshi arai* 神輿洗); this was repeated after the palanquins’ return, on the eighteenth day of the sixth month. Actors from the area’s theatres began to join the palanquin carrying large lanterns, advertising their establishments. Soon others joined, and the resulting ‘lantern parade’ (*mukae chōchin* 迎え提灯) developed into an opportunity for new streets to participate in a playful manner. There was music and dance, and street performers added to the festival atmosphere with their acts.

The dancing girls and prostitutes of Gion’s ‘teahouses’ soon followed the actors’ example by staging their own pageant (Fukuhara and Hattan 2013). Dressed up in themed costumes and accompanied by small samisen ensembles, they paraded along the route of the palanquin from the Kamo River to the Gionsha shrine. The pageants’ themes derived from the repertoire of songs and dances performed in Gion’s houses of entertainment. These events attracted large crowds of people, to the extent that they soon outshone the float parades west of the river. An additional attraction was a large fair along the riverbed, which lasted from the eighth until the eighteenth day of the sixth month. This fair is mentioned for the first time in 1662, so it predated even the 1670 embankment.<sup>16</sup> As examples of the kind of shows that were on offer here, an 1806 guidebook lists exhibitions of ‘weird and creepy things,’ songs and storytelling, acrobats, horses, monkeys, parrots, and more.<sup>17</sup> Compared to the palanquin processions and the float parades, the lantern parade, the Gion pageant, and the riverbank fair were relaxed and playful, full of opportunities for surprise, creativity, and occasions to have some unrestrained fun (Figure 5).

This expanding festival now had a bewildering array of patrons, from the Kyoto governor down to the business owners in the streets, the teahouse bosses of Gion, and more. The political patronage of the governor, partly represented by the watchmen, co-existed with the economic patronage of the merchant elite. Crisscrossing ties of commercial

<sup>16</sup>Nakagawa Kiun, *Annaisha* 案内者 (The guide, 1662). (Quoted in Kawashima 2010, 173).

<sup>17</sup>Hayami Shungyōsai’s *Shokoku zue nenjū gyōji taisei* 諸国図会年中行事大成 (Illustrated compendium of seasonal events in all provinces, 1806). (Quoted in Kawashima 2010, 174).



**Figure 5.** The riverbank fair. The text at the top explains that the fair offers ‘tea stands, funny acts, shows, theatre performances, and sales booths of all kinds’. *Gion goryōe saiki* 祇園御霊会細記 (1757). Ritsumeikan University Art Research Center.

networks and social obligations offered strong incentives not only to keep every float going, but also to expand the festival in ever new directions. Piety, too, found new avenues, with the floats acquiring the character of deity shrines. At the same time, the processions of the *mikoshi* palanquins came to include more show-like elements, as professional bearers sought to impress their paymasters and the general public with displays of strength and skill. Play, finally, branched out to new arenas that attracted visitors not only from the Lower City but also from other parts of the country. Clearly, the dynamics of the festival had changed dramatically once again.

### Phase 6 (1868–1952): disestablishment, tourism, and another war

In 1868, modernity arrived in Kyoto with a bang. Fighting leading up to the Meiji Restoration once more brought destruction to the city, reducing most floats to ashes in 1864. After the shogunate had surrendered, the emperor and his court were moved to Edo, now renamed Tokyo in the emperor’s honour. Kyoto was left to its own devices.

The Gion festival had lost the patronage of the court in the 1300s and of the shogun in the 1500s; now the Kyoto governors of the Edo period had also gone. The festival was left without any political patronage whatsoever, as new official terminology made clear: it was now referred to as the ‘Yasaka private festival’ (*Yasaka shisai* 八坂私祭). The Gionsha, renamed Yasaka Shrine in 1868, was redesigned, restaffed, and dedicated to the new task of propagating imperial Shinto ideology (Takahara 1962). The Gion festival was not a good fit for this new mission, and the shrine did not prioritise it.

The survival of the festival now depended on the float streets alone, but these communities, too, began to dissolve as the city's governance was modernised. Yet leaders of float streets organised themselves and created a new system of mutual financial support. Already in the 1880s, however, multiple floats were in acute danger of bankruptcy. In all cases, this outcome was avoided at great cost to many private caretakers (Tomii 1979). The authorities again demonstrated their lack of interest in 1912, when Kyoto Prefecture attempted to ban the parades because they interfered with the running of new tramlines; a concerted appeal led by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry persuaded the prefectural governor to relent at the last minute (Teeuwen 2023, 183–188). On the back of this success (in 1922), the streets that staged the parades' nine *hoko* floats refused to set up their floats unless Kyoto City agreed to support their efforts with public subsidies. Convinced by the argument that the whole city would suffer if the festival were to collapse, the city authorities introduced the first subsidy (for float repairs) in the following year; more subsidies followed later (Kankohoko Hozonkai 2001, 25–28). Although public subsidies remained modest, covering only a tenth of actual costs at best, one might say that the festival was now no longer completely 'private'; it had finally regained the minimum of political patronage necessary to secure its survival.

This patronage proved vital in the difficult years immediately after the war. War damage, shortages, and hyperinflation made it unthinkable to entertain ambitions of resurrecting the Gion festival. Once again, the solution came from Kyoto City, which embraced the festival as a central element in its strategy to develop Kyoto into a hub of international tourism. By providing the means to start up the festival again in 1947, the city authorities gave the festival a new lease of life, although this came at the cost of drastic reforms (Teeuwen 2020). It must be stressed, though, that this was feasible only thanks to the dedication of the inhabitants of float streets and the engagement of many Kyoto citizens.

## Conclusion

What can this brief overview of the development of the pre-modern Gion festival tell us about the role of patronage, piety, and play in the festival's historical development – especially when compared to the festival's modern setting?

First of all, it is clear that the festival's ability to attract powerful patrons has always been crucial to its survival. The court nobility in phase 1, Enryakuji in phase 2, and shoguns and other military leaders in phases 3, 4, and 5 made it possible for the festival to survive and grow. It would appear that there was a gradual shift in the main motivation for such patronage. In phase 1, the court, as the festival's main patron, sought to demonstrate its ability to gain the ear of those gods, while the governors of phase 5 viewed the parade without addressing the gods at the Gionsha. As modern-day patrons, today's city authorities stay away from both the parades and the shrine, supporting the festival in the name of tradition and culture – with a keen eye on its value as a 'tourism resource'. Early patronage cloaked itself in piety, while contemporary patronage stresses play. Yet we cannot be too categorical when we make this observation. Even in phase 1, the dances and horse races were as playful as they were pious, and also today, faith and prayer are stressed as the inner essence that gives authentic value to the festival (Teeuwen 2021).

The forms that patronage has taken have changed radically. In phase 1, the court funded the embellishment of the *mikoshi*'s return procession (*goryōe*), as well as the even more elaborate *rinjisai* on the following day. In contrast, the shoguns and governors of phases 3–5 did not offer any funding; in fact, in phase 5 money was extracted from the festival to pay for city policing. This resulted in a division between political and financial patronage. The city's rulers inserted themselves into the festival as its high protectors, while divesting its funding to 'rich houses' in phase 2, guild merchants in phase 3, and street communities in phases 4 and 5. Rather than striving to monopolise patronage, the military leaders of phases 3, 4, and 5 sought to use the festival as an opportunity to exhibit their capacity to keep the peace, while allowing (or obliging) guild and street merchants to display their economic and cultural capital. As the patrons of patrons, the shoguns and governors demonstrated their supremacy over an event where the commoner elites were vying for public repute. The merchants, meanwhile, were encouraged to write themselves into this narrative. From the perspective of the street, meanwhile, the festival served other functions in the city's web of human networks, and it appears that bowing to the governor and the watchmen was seen as an honour at best, or at worst as a small price to pay. These were the functions that kept the festival alive into phase 6, when political patronage suddenly disappeared completely.

Without such patronage the festival struggled: social networks unravelled, money was diverted elsewhere, and access to public space was no longer guaranteed. Contemporary public patronage by Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture and, to a lesser extent, the Agency for Cultural Affairs in Tokyo has been crucial to the festival's survival. This patronage is of a different nature from the political patronage of earlier phases. By presiding over the drawing of lots for the parade, the mayor replaces the Edo-period watchmen rather than the governor. Since 1923, the city has provided subsidies to float streets, and today public subsidies serve as a valuable safety net. This money, however, is allocated not by 'the ruler' but by democratically elected bodies that also represent the people who carry the festival. These circumstances radically change the meaning and perception of this modern form of financial patronage, not least in the sense that it strives to remain apolitical – and also, under Japan's post-war secularist constitution, areligious.

Piety, too, is an obvious presence in the historical record. Over time, it appears as if the gods gradually became less threatening and more benevolent. Frequent references to divine retribution give way to expectations that the gods will protect their worshippers. Possibly devotion changed also in its intensity – the fear of nobles in phase 1 was perhaps more compelling than the expectations of blessings among those who bought float amulets in phase 5. Also in the present festival there is certainly an amount of serious praying, especially under conditions of crisis, as during the COVID-19 pandemic (Teeuwen 2021).

Still, it is not unreasonable to look upon at least some of the collective displays of piety, both in the past and in the present, as form of acting 'as if' or role-play. It is striking that the Gion gods, who at first sight would appear to be the main focus of the festival, receded into the background early on in the festival's development. Already in phases 1 and 2, the *rinjisai* dances and horse races elicited more comment in nobles' diaries than the processions of the gods. From phase 3 onwards, those processions gradually attracted less patronage, while the new float parades grew in importance. The float parades were the main object of shogunal and governor viewings in phases 3, 4, and 5. As patronage

shifted, popular worship leaked from the Gion gods in their palanquins to the figurines displayed on the floats. Like patronage, piety diversified as people prayed to different deities, in hope of different blessings. The result was perhaps not less worship, but certainly a less focused form of festival piety.

This acting ‘as if’ was certainly one form of festival play, but play took other forms too. The horse races, the early floats, the Gion pageants, and the riverbank fair involved forms of play that were not role-play: competition, the enjoyment of beautiful or humorous displays, and, not least, drinking, eating, and fooling around in good company. Johan Huizinga (1938) started his pioneering work on play with the observation that not only humans but also animals love playing. Play, he argues, does not need meaning; we engage in play for its own sake, simply because we enjoy it. In grand events like Kyoto’s Gion festival, this is not always true; many actors have been forced to ‘play’ by people of power who ordered them to do so. Yet, if we wonder what has kept this festival going for more than a millennium, ‘meaningless’ play is perhaps not our worst bet. Patrons have come and gone, and the gods have long since moved from the limelight into the shadows; yet the festival goes on. Do patronage and piety ultimately feed off of our urge to play?

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes on contributor

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