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Peer reviewed

Photographic Essay

Secret Eroticism and Lived Religion

The Art of Matsuri Photography

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Abstract

Through interviews and personal observation, this chapter introduces the photographer Ogano Minoru, exploring his particular take on the practice of *matsuri* photography. In his photos, Ogano tries to visually capture the affective aspects of *matsuri* as experienced by participants. He suggests that even when *matsuri* are not organized through religious institutions, they emerge from deeply held beliefs and everyday life concerns in the local community. The concluding part of the chapter is a brief photo essay about *mushi-okuri* and related *matsuri* in the Tsugaru region (Aomori Prefecture).

Keywords

photography – *mushi-okuri* – lived religion – *matsuri* – Tsugaru

It goes without saying that *matsuri* have long been an integral part of tourism in Japan, and a significant aspect of the tourist experience of *matsuri* is photography. At any major Japanese festival, you can see serious amateur photographers wielding digital SLR cameras with massive lenses as they jockey for position, sometimes standing on ladders in order to get an unobstructed



FIGURE 10.1 The subject of photography
PHOTO BY M.D. FOSTER

view of the action. More casual visitors snap photos with compact digital or mirrorless cameras, smart phones and sometimes—awkwardly—iPads. Of course, picture-taking is not limited to large touristic festivals: even at small community-based *matsuri*, friends and family members pose for selfies or take still shots or videos of each other, and of the broader festival activity. In short, practices of photography—and underlying desires to visually apprehend, record, memorialize, aestheticize, narrativize, share—are part and parcel of the contemporary *matsuri* experience.



FIGURE 10.2
Photographers and
other spectators at
the Fukagawa Hachi-
man Matsuri in Tokyo,
12 August 2017
PHOTO BY M.D. FOS-
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This brief somewhat personal essay with photos explores the practice of *matsuri* photography by focusing on a photographer who has been taking pictures of *matsuri* for four decades. I introduce my friend and collaborator Ogano Minoru 小賀野実 (b. 1958) through the lens of my own experiences traveling with him to *matsuri* over the years, and also through his own words from recent interviews. The chapter concludes with a brief photo-essay by Ogano himself focusing on *mushi-okuri* 虫送り (literally “sending off of the insects”) events in the Tsugaru region of northern Honshū.

Ogano Minoru is a professional photographer who makes a living taking pictures of *norimono* 乗り物: vehicles such as tractors, firetrucks, ambulances, police cruisers, airplanes, buses, construction equipment and, especially, trains. In a country full of railroad aficionados, Ogano is constantly busy. He has published literally hundreds of picture books, mostly for children, and is incessantly taking photos, editing, organizing and writing for several major publishing houses. His work requires him to travel ceaselessly throughout the archipelago, from Hokkaido to Okinawa, in order to capture vehicles in the wild, as it were—not parked or pulling into a station, but live and in action, as they come around a bend, steam across a bridge, or emerge from a cove of trees. Wherever he goes, Ogano familiarizes himself with the train schedule and the landscape, so he can secure a vantage point in a field or on a hill for just the right shot—a speeding train captured crisply in full color and detail, but still retaining an ineffable sense of movement. It is a finely nuanced job that also demands physical ruggedness and a sense of adventure. Three years ago, in the hills of Kumamoto Prefecture, Ogano stumbled into a trap for wild boar (*inoshishi* 猪) and still has a scar on his leg to show for it.

For all his success and experience, however, Ogano does not consider himself a “photographer,” a *shashin-ka* 写真家. Rather he refers to himself as a “cameraman” カメラマン, emphasizing the fact that he does this work for a living: even though he is a proud and consummate professional, his photos of trains and tractors and other vehicles are a way to put food on the table. Taking pictures of *norimono* is his job, he has told me many times, not his passion.

But just as he is familiar with trains in all their local manifestations—and in both metropolitan and rural locales trains are remarkably varied—Ogano is also intimately familiar with *matsuri*. He thinks of this interest in stark contrast to his work with trains: for Ogano, photographing *matsuri* is not a way to make a living, but a passion and an art. It is, as he puts it, his “lifework.”

I first met Ogano on 12 February 2010 in the small city of Oga 男鹿 in Akita 秋田 Prefecture. We were both there for the Namahage Sedo Matsuri なまはげ 柴灯まつり, a mid-winter festival held for three consecutive nights at Shinzan



FIGURE 10.3 Shinzan Shrine, 31 December 2015
PHOTO BY M.D. FOSTER



FIGURE 10.4 Ogano with Namahage, 12 February 2012
PHOTO BY M.D. FOSTER

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Shrine (Shinzan Jinja 真山神社). Since 1998 I had been researching Namahage, both its household ritual form celebrated on New Year's Eve as well as this tourist-oriented festival held in the middle of February. My closest contact in the community, a hotel owner and community leader named Yamamoto Tsugio 山本次夫, introduced me to Ogano, explaining that he had known him for many years and that he was even more obsessed with Namahage than I was (for more on Namahage, see the chapter by Foster in this volume).

It turns out, in fact, that Ogano had been visiting, photographing, and researching Namahage since 1984. His research and photos—particularly of Namahage masks—were prominently featured in the best book on the subject I had been able to find.¹ He has undoubtedly witnessed more versions of Namahage (as performed in small hamlets throughout the region) than any other individual alive today—or perhaps ever. Despite the fact that he is not a resident of Oga, his relationship to the festival and community is profound: as a constant visitor, he is close friends with many Oga residents, well respected for his work, and privy to local politics, gossip and family dynamics. To me, the depth and breadth of his knowledge came as a revelation—and, generously, he was willing to share his insights and his contacts with me. We soon became close friends.

Since that time, I have had the opportunity to travel with Ogano to numerous festivals—Namahage, of course, but also Nebuta ねぶた in Aomori City, Neputa ねぶた in Hirosaki, and Tachineputa 立佞武多在 Goshogawara, as well as Shichi 節祭 in Iriomote-jima in the far south of Okinawa Prefecture and, most recently, the Sawara Grand Festival (Sawara *no taisai* 佐原の大祭) discussed by Tsukahara in this volume. Through these various experiences, I have gotten a sense of how a professional photographer—or at least this particular professional photographer—apprehends the experience of *matsuri*. It is a form of practice different from that of a local participant, different from a tourist and different still from an ethnographer or researcher—though, in my opinion, it contains elements of all three. Ultimately, Ogano's passion for *matsuri* derives from an interest in seeing people and capturing their emotions as they participate in these collective activities. He describes what he finds in *matsuri* as a sort of “secret eroticism” (*himitsu no erochikku* 秘密のエロチック), something exciting and unexpected and meaningful in the muddy (*doro doro shiteiru* ドロドロしている) complexity of all these people coming together.

His invocation of “eroticism” is intentional because he feels that in *matsuri* we can often discover a kind of sexuality that emerges from the very roots

¹ There are two editions of the book (Nihon Kaiiki Bunka Kenkyūjo 2004 and 2016).



FIGURE 10.5 Ogano's early photos
PHOTO BY M.D. FOSTER

(*kongen* 根源) or foundation (*kisō* 基層) of humanity. “*Matsuri*,” he says, “has an atmosphere that suggests reproduction (*seishoku* 生殖), the creation of descendants.” The prayer and desire for an abundant rice harvest is also a prayer and desire for strong and abundant children. What he sees in *matsuri* is “human ways of living” (*ikikata* 生き方). In this respect, although Ogano is hesitant to invoke the word “religion” (*shūkyō* 宗教) when talking about *matsuri*, it seems to me that he is implicitly recognizing a kind of “lived religion” that entails, in the words of Robert A. Corsi, “attention to people’s signs and practices as they describe, understand, and use them, in the circumstances of their experiences, and to the structures and conditions within which these signs and practices emerge” (Corsi 2003: 172). *Matsuri*, of course, is a dynamic expression of such contextualized signs and practices, and Ogano’s photographs are his way of paying attention to them. In turn, he causes us, as we look at his photos, to also pay attention to them.

Indeed, Ogano’s interest in *matsuri* originated simply from his desire to photograph people and their lifeways. He has shown me photos he took in his early years: they are stark, monochrome images of people in rural communities working in the fields, transporting things, posing in groups, stopping to rest. (See fig. 10.5)

It was this sort of rural lifestyle—and the emotions that go with it—that interested him from the beginning. He explained to me that he started taking photos of *matsuri*

during my school days, before even turning twenty ... because it was the kind of situation in which humans could most easily be photographed. It didn't actually have to be *matsuri*, but my first desire was to take photos of people ... The reason *matsuri* are good for this is because you can take photos of people without them complaining. If you just walk up to a person [in a regular situation] and ask if you can take their photo, they will think you are strange ... But in the case of *matsuri*, you can take people's photos without having to ask each time. It's easy—that's why I started taking pictures at *matsuri*.

What he wanted most to capture in people was “their faces, bodies, ‘spirits,’ anything. Their hearts (*kokoro* 心). These are things that come out during *matsuri* more than in normal times. In normal times, these things are hidden ... [but during *matsuri*] people reveal themselves (*sarakedasu* さらけ出す).” He goes on to note that, “if a person has a face I want to photograph, then I will take a picture. Ideally such a face will be photogenic—it doesn't have to be what we would call ‘beautiful’ as long as there is something interesting about it (*aji ga aru* 味がある).”

Ogano's interest in *matsuri* developed hand in hand with his desire not just to take pictures to sell—as he does with his *norimono* photos—but to create more transcendent images:

During *matsuri* people's feelings (*kanjō* 感情) are expressed in a way we can appreciate ... On festival days, the expressions on people's faces are easy to see ... I realized this as soon as I began taking photography seriously—it didn't matter to me until I started to think that I would like my photos to be works of art (*sakuhin* 作品) ... not just regular pictures, but something good—“art”—that's when I realized I had to start taking photos very seriously. It was then that I realized that *matsuri* were the fastest way to do this ... When I was a student, any *matsuri* anywhere in any small village was fine. But when I left school I felt that the job of a professional was to take the best pictures I could of proper *matsuri* ... It was unimaginable for a pro to be praised for a picture of just any *matsuri* in just any small village—the challenge was to take an amazing picture of an amazing *matsuri* that would make it seem even more amazing.

But what constitutes an amazing photo?

A photo in which the human appears, in which we can see the human personality (*ningensei* 人間性) of the subject. [For example] if you look at Namahage you will understand. It is not just the Namahage that is captured in these photos, but the *humans*. And not just the people, but the *feeling*. That's the difference between a photo that is a commodity (*shōhin* 商品) and one that is a work of art (*sakuhin*). In a work of art, you capture the inner feelings of the subject ...

When I asked Ogano about how one does this, how one creates a *matsuri* photo that is a work of art, he explained that you begin with technical abilities, practice, getting to know people, and practical decisions about what, where and when to take photos. Similar to ethnographic fieldwork, it is important to create a connection with members of the community:

In a lot of situations there are things you cannot photograph unless you have a good relationship with the local residents. You cannot just take pictures because it suits you (*jibun katte ni* 自分勝手に); you have to properly perform greetings (*aisatsu* 挨拶) and work to gain the support (*nemawashi* 根回し) of the villagers—that is essential. For [a large outdoor *matsuri*] like Nebuta, you just have to ask at the time whether you can take photos ... You don't necessarily have to be on good terms with the people. That is one way of taking pictures. But in my opinion, in the case of Japanese *matsuri*, it is better to be on good terms with folks before taking pictures.

But beyond the technical aspects and practical work, there is something intangible:

Even if you have a certain amount of skill, you need “sense.” Sense is like somebody's personality. It is not something you can teach. You can teach technique: “In cases like this you should do this, and so on.” Technical things can be taught. But you can't say, “you should feel this way, or you should think this way”—that can't be taught.

In December of 2018, a set of pictures of Namahage that Ogano had taken over the last three and half decades was displayed in a public venue in Oga, the small city where Namahage takes place. The same photos had been shown earlier in a gallery in the ritzy Ginza neighborhood of Tokyo, but it was in Oga that he felt



FIGURE 10.6 Ogano talking with friends at an exhibition at the Oga Station Gallery, Oga City, Akita, 30 December 2018
PHOTO BY M.D. FOSTER

rewarded by the experience. “With a work of art,” he told me, “it doesn’t matter if the person looking at it doesn’t understand it—that is fine. It doesn’t have to be mass produced. You don’t have to sell a lot. As long as it is understood by those people who understand—that is all you need.” In Oga, he explained, people truly understood his pictures and felt a connection to them. He himself was physically present for much of the exhibition, and also eagerly read comments left by visitors. It was particularly meaningful for him when somebody would identify a friend or relative in the image, or talk with him about their own personal memories of Namahage.

In most gallery exhibitions, Ogano told me, touching a picture is strictly prohibited. But in the Oga exhibition he was thrilled to observe visitors constantly touching his photos with their fingers; it was as if they were making contact with a memory, an experience, a feeling beyond the two-dimensional veneer of the photographic surface. While Ogano himself did not describe it this way, it seems to me that there is a kind of eroticism at work here as well, with the intimate, private household ritual revealed for all to gaze upon in the public space of the gallery. Those who look carefully can find, as it were, a nakedness to each image, a revelation of intensity and emotion that, while not sexual, is deeply personal. To some viewers—particularly those who know the people in the photos—the images must transcend their flatness, suggesting something affective, embodied, tantalizingly three-dimensional, and stimulating a desire to make physical contact.

Despite his hundreds of books on trains and other vehicles, Ogano has published very little on *matsuri*—his only book was the volume on Namahage masks mentioned above. But this has changed recently. After his Namahage exhibition, he was asked to produce a photo book on Namahage for both children and adults, and it has recently been released (Ogano 2019). Now he is eager to start work on other *matsuri*—*dashi* 山車 or *yamahoko* 山鉾 style *matsuri* found throughout Japan, and then *neputa*-style *matsuri*. Having passed the celebratory age of sixty, he explains, it is finally time to share his “lifework.”

One type of *matsuri* Ogano has explored on and off for years is *mushi-okuri*, which is found mostly in the Tōhoku and Kantō regions. Although it takes many different forms, *mushi-okuri* is generally performed during the early part of the growing season to protect the rice crop from insects that cause disease and damage. Ogano speculates that the custom is probably more prominent in the northern part of Japan because the summer growing season is shorter than in the south. Insects come suddenly and just at the moment when the success of the crops is absolutely crucial. In warmer climates, he suggests, the longer growing season gives farmers a chance to plant something else even if some crops are eaten by insects.

Ogano himself has spent a lot of time in Goshogawara 五所川原 in the Tsugaru 津軽 region of Aomori Prefecture, where *mushi-okuri* takes place in late June. He has only seriously photographed the *matsuri* twice—the first time about twenty years ago—but has observed *mushi-okuri* three other times and also made many local acquaintances through photographing Tachineputa, another Goshogawara festival held later in the summer. Particularly in the case of *mushi-okuri*, he explains, “If you are not on good terms with people you can’t take good photos. Because *mushi-okuri* is not a performance (*engi* 演技) for visitors.”

Ogano does not see a direct connection between *mushi-okuri* and institutional religious structures, what he would label *shūkyō*. It is, however, part of an informal belief system, the sort of lived religion discussed above. Undoubtedly, Ogano explains, *mushi-okuri* constitutes a form of worship, but the “organizing factor” is the *shūroku* 集落 (hamlet; village; community) rather than a temple or a shrine. The *matsuri* develops not through the auspices of a specific religious institution but from a deep-seated *shinkō* 信仰, or belief, in which it is felt that an effigy in the shape of a *mushi* must be sacrificed to the *kami* 神 for protection. His understanding of this *kami* is that it generally does not have a specified name or body (*jittai* 実態) but is more of a “feeling.”

Ogano points out, however, that even though *mushi-okuri* itself is rarely administered by religious institutions, the event often begins with visits to the

shrines in each community. There the *yatai* 屋台 (festival floats) and the people carrying them are blessed for safety by the local *kami*. As is visible in some of the images that follow, they also receive a *gohei* 御幣, a wooden wand with white paper streamers, as a sign of this blessing and an indication that the *kami* are present during the *matsuri*. In one image, we can see a *shimenawa* 注連縄, a Shintō symbol indicating sacredness. The incorporation of such Shintō materials and practices into the performance of a community festival like *mushi-okuri*, of course, reflects the ways in which religion is intertwined with everyday life in rural Aomori (and elsewhere).

Now, having spent these pages introducing my friend Ogano and his approach to *matsuri* and photography, I end with a brief set of his photos and explanations (translated by me), introducing *mushi-okuri* and two related *matsuri*.

1 *Mushi-okuri* in Tsugaru

In the very northern part of Honshū, in the plains of Tsugaru in present-day Aomori Prefecture, one can still find festivals called *mushi-okuri* that are characteristic of agricultural peoples and lifestyles. Tsugaru is ravaged by blowing snow throughout the winter, but spring comes with a sudden burst of green and a beautiful spreading landscape of rice paddies and vegetable fields. After the rice seedlings have been planted and grow to a certain point, all at once there appear hordes of insects that carry disease and damage plants. In order to thwart this pestilence and pray for the healthy growth of the rice, a ceremony called *mushi-okuri* is performed.

It is said that *mushi-okuri* in Tsugaru has been performed since the advent of agriculture in Japan some 3000 years ago. But as far as written documents are concerned, it is recorded in the *Eiroku nikki* 永禄日記 that in the sixth month of the year 1627 there was an overwhelming invasion of insects, so each village performed a *mushi-okuri* ceremony, and within the Tsugaru domain, the Tendai 天台 Buddhist monk Tenkai 天海 (1536–1643) led prayers for seven days. Nonetheless, it is said that an infestation of locusts destroyed the entire rice crop on the Tsugaru plains that year. This is thought to be the origins of the current form of *mushi-okuri* ritual in the region.

The “*mushi*” 虫 (insect) used in the *mushi-okuri* ceremony is in the shape of a *ryūda* 竜蛇 which is a combination of dragon and snake, and appears frequently in a number of *matsuri* throughout Japan. The head is mostly made from wood, and the body is made from rice straw. Large ones can be between five and ten meters long, while smaller ones are only about one meter long.



FIGURE 10.7 *Ryūda* head

PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU



FIGURE 10.8 *Ryūda* heads
PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU

Large *mushi* are hung as protection in tall trees or other high places at the entrance to the village. Smaller *mushi* are floated through the rice paddies or through the canals and irrigation ditches of the community, in rites such as *sanaburi* 早苗振り, to pray for the growth of the rice plants.

2 Oku-Tsugaru Mushi to Hi Matsuri 奥津軽虫と火まつり

Today there is a festival called Oku-Tsugaru Mushi to Hi Matsuri, which started in June of 1973 as a merging of *mushi-okuri* with a *hi-matsuri* (fire festival). Originally, every community performed this similarly, and the festival entailed pulling a 5–6 meter *mushi* on a large *yatai* around the village. With the *mushi-okuri yatai* in the lead role, each village group accompanies it with a different local performance. One after another, we can see performances such as the *aruma* 荒馬 dance that imitates a horse, or the *shishi mai* 獅子舞 “lion dance,” or the very showy *tachi-buri* 太刀振り sword performance. The style of this festival is similar to the summertime Tachineputa festival, also famous in Tsugaru.



FIGURE 10.9 Scene from Oku-Tsugaru Mushi to Hi Matsuri
PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU



FIGURE 10.10 Scene from Oku-Tsugaru Mushi to Hi Matsuri
PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU

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FIGURE 10.11 Scene from Oku-Tsugaru Mushi to Hi Matsuri
PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU



FIGURE 10.12 Scene from Oku-Tsugaru Mushi to Hi Matsuri
PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU



FIGURE 10.13 Scene from Oku-Tsugaru Mushi to Hi Matsuri
PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU

Every year in mid to late June, Mushi to Hi Matsuri takes place in Goshogawara. Gigantic torches, made from grass thatching bundled together and weighing some 70–80 kilograms, are pulled throughout the town by young folk dressed all in white. At the end, the giant torches are lit up at the riverbed near the Iwaki River 岩木川, and there, accompanied by a fireworks display, an especially large “insect” is burnt. This is called the “Ascension of the Insects” (*mushi no shōten* 虫の昇天), and it is considered the climax of the festival.



FIGURE 10.14 Scene from Oku-Tsugaru Mushi to Hi Matsuri
 PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU



FIGURE 10.15 Scene from Oku-Tsugaru Mushi to Hi Matsuri
PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU



FIGURE 10.16 Scene from Oku-Tsugaru Mushi to Hi Matsuri
PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU

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FIGURE 10.17 Scene from Oku-Tsugaru Mushi to Hi Matsuri
PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU



FIGURE 10.18 Scene from Oku-Tsugaru Mushi to Hi Matsuri
PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU

3 Uma-ichi Matsuri 馬市まつり

Near Goshogawara, in Tsugaru City つがる市 (formerly Kizukuri Machi 木造町), they hold a festival called Uma-ichi Matsuri every year at the end of August. In the early part of the twentieth century, there used to be an auction for selling farm horses (*uma* 馬). In recollection of the bustle and excitement of that time, a new festival was created [in 1975].² A *nebuta* float in the shape of a horse is paraded through the town, and in the evening, the float is set on fire. But even here, we can see “insects”: a *mushi* made of straw rides on the back of the horse.

For many years, the *mushi* has been a symbol—even a mascot—of the Tsugaru region. You can find images of *mushi* (or *ryūda*) in various places, such as on manhole covers or as decorations on postboxes. Seeing something like this for the first time in the Goshogawara region, you might not understand what it means. It could be a caterpillar or maybe a snake, and it would not be unreasonable to see it as a dragon. But most people would not think it is an insect!

² According to the Tsugaru City website, the horse auction first began in 1903. For more on the history and current format, see <https://www.city.tsugaru.aomori.jp/tourism/event/5/3478.html> (accessed 20 September 2019).



FIGURE 10.19 Uma-ichi Matsuri
PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU



FIGURE 10.20
Manhole cover
PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU

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FIGURE 10.21 Postbox

PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU

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