CHAPTER 11
Continuity and Change in Japan’s Phallic Festivals

Most of the descriptions and discussions presented so far have linked the religious display of sexual imagery to human and agricultural fertility within the dimension of space. This chapter will add the dimension of time, because much activity takes place within the context of a sexual shrine’s annual matsuri, a word usually translated into English as ‘festival’, although the Spanish word fiesta conjures up more readily the exuberance and gaiety that is commonly involved. If such events are publicised in English the expression ‘phallic festival’ is likely to be used, and this is not entirely inappropriate because very little ktenic imagery is to be seen at these lively gatherings.

The study of phallic festivals adds greatly to our knowledge of the sexual gods, because no other aspect of Japan’s sexual beliefs reveals more about the balance between continuity and change and the relationship between human and agricultural fertility. Both concerns are reflected in recent changes to the matsuri calendar, which was once firmly tied to the cycle of seedtime and harvest. In many cases it still is, but far more numerous are the occasions when the link with agriculture has been broken. Also broken may be its historical continuity, with some festivals being discontinued and then revived long afterwards. Some can even be shown to have been invented recently for commercial purposes.

During the course of any shrine’s matsuri, sexual or not and regardless of whether it is a small-scale local event or a highly publicised celebration attracting thousands of onlookers, the establishment and its associated beliefs are placed firmly on public show. A building that may seem empty and almost abandoned for much of the year becomes for a short interval of time a riot of colour and activity where sacred and secular combine in a communal celebration. This archetypal matsuri is a communion between the human and the divine where the enshrined kami joins its worshippers in a celebration that combines the two elements of religious ritual and social rejoicing. Both these factors, each of them vital to the success of a matsuri, are expressed reverently, freely, joyously and sometimes very noisily. In a ritual akin to the offering of hospitality to an honoured guest in one’s home the kami is invited to attend, received into a prepared space, entertained, petitioned and then seen off again with thanks, and at almost every matsuri a key element in the activities is the carrying in procession of an ornate mikoshi, the sacred palanquin in which the kami is conveyed in a symbolic journey around a set route.
That, at any rate, is the ideal view of a *matsuri* as set out by scholars of the subject such as Ashkenazi, and at first sight most of the phallic *matsuri* conform to these expectations. All involve a considerable element of phallic symbolism, and it is almost inevitable that if there is a parade a large phallus will be included along with the *mikoshi*. This one large phallus can perform two roles. It may be the quintessence of the devotional function whereby it acts as a representation of the enshrined deity and is paraded to receive adoration. The phallus that is used for this purpose may even be the shrine’s *goshintai*, although a large and heavy one is difficult to manipulate, as shown by my observation of the Hodare *matsuri* ほだれ祭り in Tochio (Niigata Prefecture) in 2014. A block and tackle were needed to take the huge phallus from the shrine. It was fastened on to the carrying framework not by traditional ropes but using modern webbing and locking devices, and then carried with some difficulty over the slippery hard-packed snow.

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2 From a personal observation made on 9 March 2014.