CHAPTER SIX

FICTIONCRITICAL MOMENTUM:
YAMAKASA MASCUlINITY AS HAkATA TRAdITION

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Hakata Gion Yamakasa is an annual festival held every July that has evolved as a tradition with more than seven hundred years of religious observance. Although Hakata locals typically abbreviate the name for this set of religious rites to Yamakasa or even Yama, from the perspective of Kushida Shrine, its formal title is Kushida Jinja Gion Reitaisai. Designated by the Ministry of Education as a Significant Intangible Folk Cultural Asset in 1979, the most popular account of the festival's origins refers back to 1241. Hakata was stricken by the plague and Shōichi Kokushi (Enni Ben- nen, 1202–1280), founder of Rinzai Zen temple Jōtenji, was carried through the streets on a sekidana shelf by Hakata merchants as he chanted prayers and sprinkled holy water to dispel the scourge. Despite these Buddhist origins, Yamakasa is a rite administered by Kushida Shrine, a Shinto institution that placates Susanoo, the god of sea and storms.¹

Imagine a festival lasting two weeks held in the summer heat of Fuku- oka, with thousands of men organized into seven teams (called nagare) carrying wooden shrines, each weighing one ton, around a five-kilometre course. On 1 July, Shinto rites call the gods to descend into these mobile shrines and Kushida Shrine priests purify the course. On 9 July, the seven teams run from Kushida Shrine to Hakozaki Shrine, collecting sand that will protect them from injuries once they start carrying the enormous shrines the following day. The local media pay such close attention to the time it takes each shrine to run the course that the final oiyama event on 15 July is portrayed as something approaching sport. At the same time, the

¹ Susanoo, brother of Amaterasu and one of the ‘treasured children’ of Izanami is portrayed in the Kojiki [Record of ancient matters] (712) as an ‘ambivalent figure’, described as ‘mischievous, wilful, destructive, wily, and courageous’. Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) saw him as an ‘evil deity’, seeing his stated desire to go to the land of his mother ‘as revealing an affinity with yomi, the land of death and pollution’. Susan L. Burns, Before the Nation: Kokugaku and the Imagining of Community in Early Modern Japan (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 88.
festival is an important attraction for domestic and international tourism; sacramental Japanese identity is hawked to national media networks as local believers perform this public worship.

The Yamakasa worldview is premised on the medieval belief in adversarial forces that cannot be controlled. The annual repetition of these rites temporarily pacifies those forces that would destroy Hakata. For two weeks in July, each sweaty step of a Yamakasa course cleaves through seven centuries of passionate conviction. A complex history surrounds the dispersal of the Gion tradition from Kyoto to Hakata, including the import of gods from the Korean Peninsula, and the incorporation of Yamakasa elements in the Okunchi autumn harvest rites of northern Kyushu. The integration of Buddhist and Shinto institutions and practices in the Yamakasa cycle predates the attempt made in the nineteenth century to exterminate Buddhism and incorporate its remnants within a state-centred Shinto.

The nagare divisions themselves appeared as a result of an edict by the sixteenth-century warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who redeveloped a war-torn Hakata by splitting the city into seven districts. Over time the number of nagare teams has fluctuated, but today pre-war and post-war conventions coexist as the structure of these basic units has only been partially affected by post-war place name changes. Participants wear mizuhappi coats woven from cotton textile, a nineteenth-century innovation made in response to a national government ban on ‘naked’ (topless) runners.

This chapter draws on the author’s own experience of participating in the festival since 2007 to present a fictocritical diary of a Yamakasa runner’s thoughts on his journey through the streets of Hakata, conflating past and present, individual and community. The focus here is tradition as a prayer-in-action; documenting the local intensities of Yamakasa experience as the sacramental component of a problematic national history. More broadly, this asks what forms of pleasure and authority sustain the category of national culture. In the words of celebrated tea advocate Okakura Tenshin:

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2 Like Yamakasa, the Kyoto Gion festival originated in the ninth century as part of a purification ritual to appease the gods at a time when the people were suffering from plague. Fukuma Yūji, ‘The Spread of the Gion Festival in Provinces’, in Fukuoka Style, vol. 9 (1994), pp. 94–107. See also pp. i–xv.


4 Tim Cross, ‘Rikyū has left the Tea Room: cinema interrogates the anecdotal legend’, in Morgan Pitelka (ed.), Japanese Tea Culture: Art, History, and Practice (London and New