

Understanding Japanese Public Space Through the Experience of Ritual Time

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“Building and towns enable us to structure, understand and remember the shapeless flow of reality and, ultimately, to recognize and remember who we are.” (Pallasmaa 2017: 76)

The centers of western European villages and towns are often articulated as a public outdoor space, defined by the surrounding built forms which might include the church (*religious center*) and the town hall (*secular center*) where community gatherings, seasonal events, cultural and/or spiritual rituals are celebrated. (Cullen 1971: 97-102) In contrast, according to Professor Kojiro Yuichiro, “the center of a traditional Japanese village does not lie within a hard-bordered spatial entity, but rather in a linear time-oriented axis stretching from the mountain shrine, through the village shrine, to the field shrine.” (Thompson et al 1988: 1)

In other words, the Japanese village “public square” exists rather in the arrangement of the town or village as a gestalt whole and through the collective memory of its inhabitants intimately bound up and renewed by their sacred festivals. According to Thompson, “The public spaces in Japanese towns and villages are the streets rather than a central square because the Japanese perception of street and private spaces is a part of an integral space-time continuum or *ma*. Life is seen as a process of ebb and flow, rather than a series of events; it changes metamorphically just as nature does from season to season, age to age, birth to death, in endless rhythms of renewal.”¹

¹ https://unittwentyfour.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/japanese_mountain_deities_ar_oct_1997.pdf

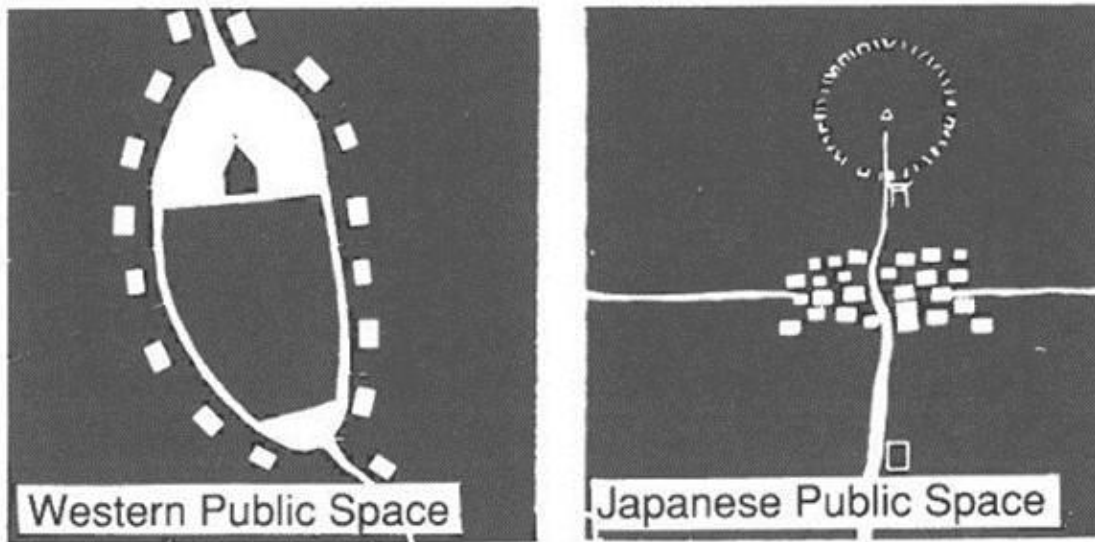


Figure 1: Western Public Space versus Japanese Public Space (Thompson et al 1988:1)

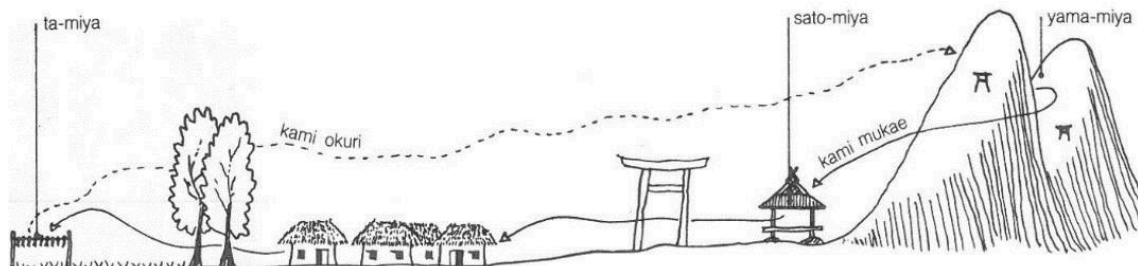
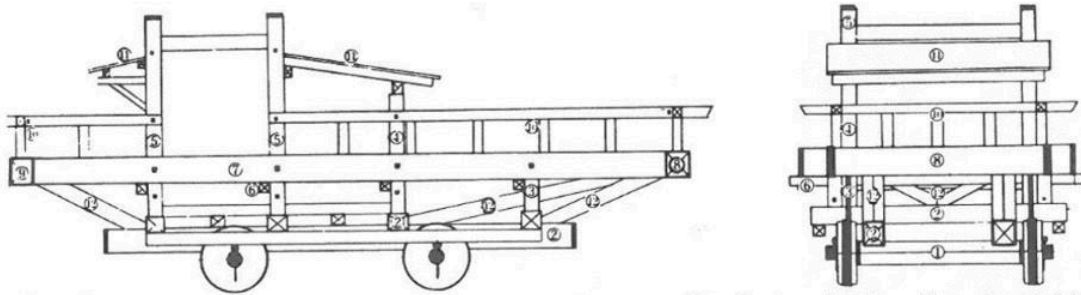


Figure 2: Schematic sketch of kami journey during matsuri for yama-no-kami festival (Thompson et al 1988:11)

Through the lens of seminal research by Fred Thompson with Sheri Blake and Yasumasa Someya as articulated in their book *Ritual and Space*, along with insights from Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses*, the paper presentation will explore the September festival of *Oyama Bayashi* in Kakunodate, a small feudal town within the Akita Prefecture of northern Japan known for the preserved architecture of its Edo-period homes located within distinct samurai *Uchimachi* and merchant/townspeople *Tomachi* precincts to demonstrate how the festival clearly reveals several aspects of Japanese space: "...its mutability, its magical enlivening by the presence of the Gods, its sequential, integrated, and participatory qualities." (Thompson et al 1988: 76)

Employing a series of film clips, photographs, illustrations and narrative, the paper presentation will demonstrate how this enduring annual festival, rooted in Shinto religious rituals known as *Matsuri*, illuminates for westerners how the entire spatial context of the town becomes the locus for the restoration of divine energy of life *ke* within its inhabitants made possible through divine communion with the mountain deity *kami* and their fellow people. In Kakunodate, *matsuri* is composed of two different sets of practices: a series of purification rites performed by professional priests which include exorcism, ritual prayer, dancing, and

processions of a *Mikoshi* or portable shrine, and a three-day procession of holy wagons *hiki-yama* by townspeople. The three-day *matsuri* represents a coalescing of competing religious and political forces played out in the exciting wagon procession, frenzied negotiations and battling which ultimately culminates in the dramatic crashing of the *hiki-yama* at various intersections throughout the town.



Hiki-yama or festival wagon (literally translated: pulling mountain)

Figure 3: *hiki-yama* or festival wagon (literally translated: pulling mountain) (Thompson et al 1988:27)

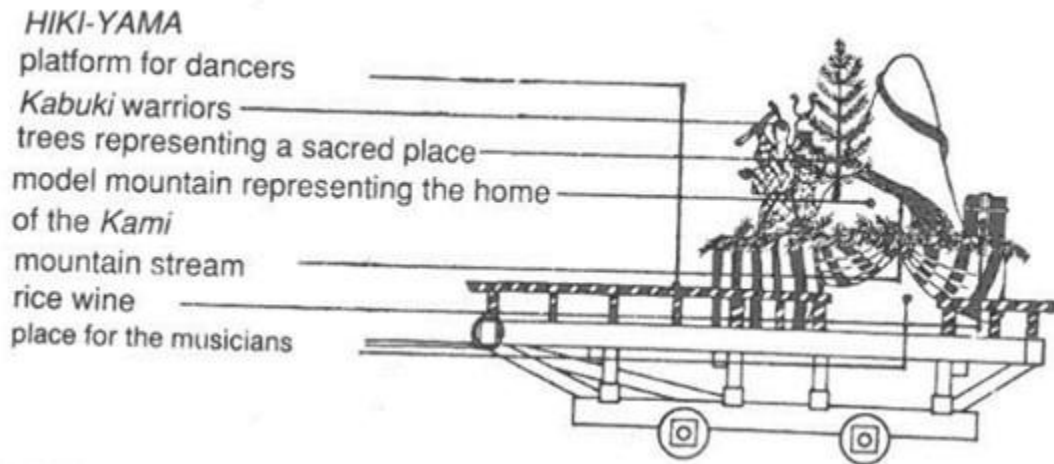


Figure 4: *hiki-yama* with decorations that serve as *yorishiro* (Thompson et al 1988:28)



Figure 5: crashing haki-yama at town intersection (Thompson et al 1988:35)

For this holy period every year since feudal times, historical time is briefly suspended to reveal a sacred ritual time for cyclical renewal, a time for participation of all citizens in ritual purification, *sake* induced divine communion with the *kami*, and a revitalization of community energy within a collective event where the actors and audience merge into a single organism, cathartically unifying hearts, and minds. In Shinto terminology, sacred life *hare* is thus seamlessly restored, renewed, and re-integrated with secular life *ke*. (Thompson et al 1988:20)

“In its way of representing and structuring action and power, societal and cultural order, interaction and separation, identity and memory, architecture is engaged with fundamental existential questions.” (Pallasmaa 2017:76)

In accordance with the thematic focus of ACSF 14, this paper seeks to reveal the fusion of cultural heritage with spirituality through ritual festival to help us understand the concept of public space within traditional Japanese villages.

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