

Public Performance and Spiritual Uplift: Seki *Matsuri* and “the Flow”

Brian James Mahoney

公的儀礼行為と精神的昇華：関宿の祭りと「フロー」

ブライアン ジェームズ マホニー

〈摘要〉

ファン・ヘネップは、儀礼的行為には「分離期」「移行期／過渡期」「統合期」の三つの段階があると主張したが、その後ターナーは、儀礼的行為を公的な活動（カーニバル、祭り等）として解釈し、ヘネップの三つの段階を「フレーム」「フロー」「リフレクション」と修正した。本稿では、ターナーの議論を援用し、三重県関町で毎年夏に開催される壮麗な公的活動、関宿祇園夏祭に焦点を当てる。筆者は長年に渡って関木崎祭囃子の構成員であるが、本稿では祭りの体験と儀礼的行為として論じるとともに、筆者及び同じく祭りに参加した人々の経験を報告する。祭りの目的は地域神、守り神を奉るものであるが、それはつまりターナーの言うところの「フロー」であり、人々を祭りの“魂”に導くものである。

キーワード：関宿祇園夏祭、東海道五十三次の関宿、祭囃子、儀式、三重県指定文化財

1. Introduction

Termed the “Rites of Passage”, folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) introduced three stages of ritual practice, of which he categorized as the pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal. The liminal or “threshold” may be best understood as a time and space where departure, transition and return take place. Advancing upon van Gennep’s original work, cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, in a paper published in 1979, introduced a concept he called “public reflexivity” where the liminal stages of ritual as a part of public performance, a carnival or festival, for example, are redefined as *frame*, *flow* and *reflection*. To examine what Turner means by frame, flow and reflection, I will focus on the town of Seki in Mie prefecture, a small community of roughly 7,000 located in central Japan where I have lived for the past twenty years. As a longtime member of Seki’s shrine festival musical group (Seki’s *Kozaki matsuri bayashi*), I look to reflect on my personal experiences, and those of others with whom I share this special time of ritual performance in the public sphere.

To begin with, I will discuss the concept of “frame” as I introduce the town of Seki and its major public performance the shrine festival or *matsuri*. Next, as the central aspect of the *matsuri* revolves around the local deity or “kami”, I will discuss the connection between folk religion, or folk Shinto, and that of Seki’s *matsuri* and its worship of the *kami*, in effect what truly the festival is about. It is within this frame of worship and celebration that everyday life is suspended, and “communitas”, or the true spirit of the community arises. In this transitional or “liminal” state, the participant may experience a certain power or oneness -being in the “flow”- with the subject of veneration and upon return, or what Turner denotes as “reflection”, thus feel transformed. I argue that it is this aspect of spiritual uplifting, that largely compels participants to renew the act of ritual as public performance year after year, generation after generation, for time eternal.

2. Frame: Seki *matsuri* through space and time

In preparation for this paper, I conducted interviews with Tanigawa Kazuhiro (aged 66) and Kasai Satoshi (aged 43) who are both residents of Seki and have long played key roles in Seki’s *matsuri*. Over two separate interview sessions (Tanigawa/Kasai, personal communication, Nov. 14th & 28th, 2021), we discussed a range of topics about Seki, its history, and most importantly, its annual shrine festival.

First documented as a strategic meeting point during the Jinshin War in the year 672 CE (鈴鹿関町文上巻, pgs. 31-34), Suzuka no Seki (鈴鹿関), as it was known in ancient times, was for nearly one hundred fifty years the largest of the San-Gen (古代三関), or three great barriers stations of the central Kinai domain (See Mahoney: *Imagining Suzuka no Seki*). By the beginning of the 17th century, the Tokugawa *bakufu* had redeveloped Seki into one of the major post towns along the Tōkaidō thoroughfare connecting the capital of Kyoto with Edo (Tokyo). However, the town, located at the base of a mountain range with several large rivers, the *Kabuto*, *Suzuka* and *Ono*, has long owed its sustenance to that of abundant agriculture and forestry resources. According to Tanigawa and Kasai (2021), the local *kami* (deity/sometimes pluralized as deities) is viewed as the progenitor of rice, wheat and agricultural food stuffs and praised since ancient times for the continuing generosity it bestows upon the community. It is commonly believed that the *kami* resides in the fields from spring until the end of autumn, leaving for the mountains in winter time. It is for the summertime shrine festival that the *kami* is ritually summoned to its “earthly” home inside

of Seki’s central shrine. Miyake (pg. 25) writes that for the Japanese people religious beliefs can be described as an amalgamation of its more primitive beginnings with that of elements from Shinto, Buddhism, Daoism, yin-yang dualism, Confucianism, and therefore the term “folk religion” (*minzoku shūkyō*) more accurately applies. This folk religion, with its festivals, annual observances, rites of passage, and even exorcism, thus “puts the greatest emphasis not on ideas but on rituals.”



Figure 1. 関宿中町 Tradition has it that during the time of winter in Seki-Juku, the local *kami* leaves for the nearby mountains. Photo by Author.

According to Turner (pg. 468), “Ritual time is ordered by rules of procedure, written or unwritten...with a well-defined beginning, middle, and end”. In Seki, as a prelude for the coming of the *kami*, rites of purification are meant to drive away evil and to welcome the *kami* home. The morning before public performances carefully orchestrated private rituals are conducted by the Shinto priest(s) and attendants (Tanigawa, 2021). The very first “act” of the *matsuri* is to ritually invoke the *kami* from its inner sanctuary with elaborate offerings,

including but not limited to that of rice, salt, water, rice wine and a cut of fresh *sakaki* branches (Ono, pgs. 65,66). Schnell (pg. 17) writes that the *kami*'s spirit is then "bound" to a talisman, whereas Ono (pg. 68) writes that the *kami* itself is symbolically transferred from the inner sanctuary to the sacred palanquin (*mikoshi*). In whichever case, the palanquin serves as the temporary abode of the *kami*/spirit as it is paraded through town (Tanigawa, 2021).

Turner (pg. 467) writes that, "All performances require framed spaces set off from the routine world". Turner describes this space(s) as either permanent, the shrine building itself, for example, or in the case of the public performance, a space that is situational. The spaces that are delineated for the Seki *matsuri* includes those which are fixed, the two shrines and storehouses where the palanquin and 2-3 story wooden wagons (festival floats) are kept, and those that are situational, the routes that the procession follows being decided yearly by neighborhood leaders. What is central to the concept of public reflexivity though is that these spaces are in public view. They are not, as Turner writes, "secret affairs" where rites are performed in "caves or groves or in lodges protected from profanation by poisoned arrows." However, there are at least two major aspects of the *matsuri* that really are in a sense "secret affairs", the ritual invocations, for one, and the *otabisho* or resting place another. The *otabisho* is a somewhat secret location where the *kami* rests for the night in-between visiting the shrines during festival time (Ono, 69). In Seki, this resting place is located on the grounds of the town's original shrine, *fue fuki daimyo-ji* (笛吹大明神).

The Seki *matsuri* involves two types or structures within the framing process, on the one hand, a carefully controlled environment with fixed time and space that include "firm procedural, even rubrical rules" and contrasting with this, situational time and space for which Turner says gives rise to, "numinous", or more plainly speaking, "a time of wonders" (pg. 470). In this so-called higher reality, a parallel world emerges where several key things may occur, including a temporary suspension of the mundane life, role and status reversals, a refocusing or reengagement with the past, "chaos" to an acceptable limit, and so forth. To mark these polarities in social structure and behavior, Turner introduced the terms *communitas* and "anti-structure", he describes it as, "the mutual confrontation of human beings stripped of status role characteristics - people, "just as they are," getting through to each other..." (pg. 471).

3. Performance: “*Communitas*” and the *matsuri*

It is an especially powerful moment, and something that seems right at home with Turner’s concept of *communitas* or *anti-structure*, when a group of unmarried men in their late teens and early twenties, clad in all white from sacred footwear to sacred headband, hoist the palanquin (神輿) upon their able-bodied shoulders. The final destination is already known, however, as their own spirits become one with the *kami*, they will travel as freely as the *kami* takes them. According to Tanigawa/Kasai (2021), after the conclusion of the “deity transfer ceremony” (*kamiutsushi*) the palanquin procession begins in the late morning of the first day, and is marked by the loud voices, rhythmically chanting “*wasshoi, wasshoi*”- a special call to the community that the *kami* is now in their presence. Turner (pg. 468) mentions that often these audible markers are used in ritual, the shouting and chanting, for example, to dramatically signal that secular time has now been suspended and the time for the sacred has taken center stage. And so, these ten to fifteen young men, who have seemingly taken over the streets of the community, carry the palanquin throughout the day, stopping at random to bless various homes and businesses, chanting and gesticulating with bountiful energy. It is an especially dramatic example of the role and status reversals taking place, with full control and responsibility of the *kami*, for which the spirit of the community seems to truly rest upon their shoulders.

By late afternoon, the neighborhoods grow ever so quiet, as early evening brings the main event- the *dashi-gyōretsu* or giant wooden wagon (float) procession (山車行列). Crowds gather, and various large groups of participants soon appear clothed in their own unique colorful *matsuri* costumes, chanting and merry-making as they pull the enormous wooden wagons, known as *dashi* (山車), full of musicians playing bamboo flutes, drums and gongs. It is most evident at this time of *matsuri*, where the everyday routine of life is suspended and what Turner (pg. 265) so aptly describes as “a state or process which is betwixt-and-between the normal” arises to supplant it- if only for a short time. In contrast to the shrine ceremonies, the *dashi* procession introduces a whole new array of personalities, positions and responsibilities amongst the wide-variety of participants. As Schnell (pg. 20) comments, “The liminal phase (where according to Turner social relationships are upended, reversed, or even abandoned all together) is significant in terms of social process, as it represents an opportunity for introducing new ideas”. This can be seen most clearly in the new hierarchy of positions that is represented by each of the four neighborhood 2-3 story wooden *dashi*. At

ground level centered around the *dashi* itself, are the “muscle”, a mixture of younger and not-so-young men who while chanting traditional work songs, carefully maneuver and direct the several ton- four-wheeled wagon. With heavy ropes in hand, the “pullers” make up the largest share of participants, men, women and children whose job is to literally pull the *dashi*, not easy work either considering the wooden wagon wheels alone measure a meter and half tall. At the second level, or on the first tier, are the musicians whose positions are based upon instrument, age, gender and experience. The single large suspended-drum (*tsuri-daiko* 釣太鼓), providing the main rhythmic pulse, is hidden inside as well as that of the young boys who play it. At the front, in full public view is the group of five young girls, while singing and chanting in unison, play the smaller tension drums (*shime-daiko* 締太鼓), and the small gong (*kane* 鉦). Positioned around the first tier of the cart are the bamboo flute (*shinobue* 篠笛) players, both men and women, and finally the master flute player (the musical leader) who is positioned in the front just behind the young girls. Rounding out the group, and standing alone upon the wagon’s central beam facing the musicians is the “guide”, Kozaki’s spiritual driver (see figure 2).



Figure 2. 木崎の山車 The *muscle*, *pullers*, musicians, the “guide” and at the top- the leaders propel Kozaki’s *dashi*. Photo by Syuzo Kariya.

At the next and final level, are the neighborhood leaders who, at least during the *matsuri*, ‘sit atop the mountain’ above everyone else (enjoying the best view). It is interesting to note that our neighborhood’s three *matsuri* leaders (who are basically volunteers), are employed as a plumber, delivery truck driver and museum staff, respectively (Tanigawa/Kasai, 2021). Turner (pg. 467) makes specific note about this when he writes, “in many cultures rituals performed at major calendrical turns portrayed turnabouts of normal social status”, however, Turner finds that this is only one part of the story, he continues, “Just as important are the ways society finds in these public rituals of commenting on and critiquing itself”. Certainly, once the sacred returns to the mundane, I cannot help but have a sense of respect for our *matsuri* leaders, regardless of their occupation or social position. Therefore, it is not only a way of a community critiquing itself, but also that of individuals reassessing pre-conceived notions of hierarchy and social status, and the extent of power and/or authority.

4. “Into the Flow” of the *matsuri*

Especially in smaller more tight-knit communities such as Seki, the public acts of ritual have long been practiced not only for praise and protection but as an expression of the unique flavor or individuality of the peoples themselves. In times past, from the Edo era (beg. 1603)



Figure 3. Kozaki’s legend of the “Kappa” or *water spirit* silk embroidered tapestry.
Photo by Syuzo Kariya.

until the early period of the Meiji era (beg. 1868), the Seki *matsuri* had two uniquely separate festivals happening simultaneously, one in the Shinjo neighborhood centered around the shrine *Fue fuki daimyo-ji* and the other in the Naka-machi / Kozaki neighborhoods



Figure 4. 三番町 (San-Ban Chō)

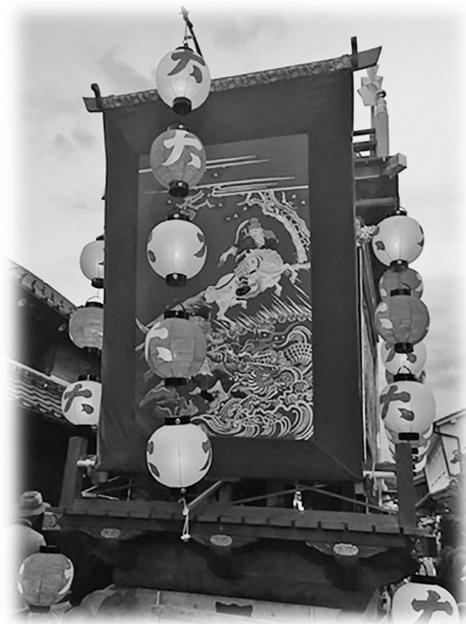


Figure 5. 北裏 (Kita-Ura)



Figure 6. 四番町 (Yon-Ban-Chō)

Photos 4, 5, 6 by Author.

originating from what is now called Seki shrine, or *Seki-jinja*. During its golden age from the middle years of the Edo era (early 19th century) through the time of the Meiji era, the Seki *matsuri* featured a total of sixteen, 2-3 story wooden *dashi*, six of them in the Shinjo neighborhood, eight in Naka-machi, and two in Kozaki (鈴鹿関町文上巻, pgs. 622-625). While today, only four *dashi* remain, three in Naka-machi and one in Kozaki, each neighborhood’s wooden wagon is highly unique, quite different in architectural design and decoration, including the exquisite silk tapestries, and lanterns which adorn them (see figures 3, 4, 5 & 6).

Together with the giant wooden *dashi* and classic Edo era townscape, adding significantly to the overall atmosphere of the festival are the neighborhood’s uniquely distinctive symbols, colors and *matsuri* costume. And bringing all these varied elements together as if it were a single whole is the music of Seki *matsuri*. According to Tanigawa and Kasai (2021), in the early 1800 s, an imperial court musician of some renown by the name of *Saito Tarozaimon*, had fallen ill while on his way to visit the Grand Shrine of Ise taking rest in Seki town. During his long recovery in Seki, he witnessed the *matsuri* and inspired by the kindness shown to him by the people of Seki, composed a song to accompany what was then a music-less procession. Creating the melody and all musical parts by chanted verse, *Tarozaimon* constructed a multi-layered composition similar in theme and tonality to that of *gagaku*, or imperial court music of ancient Kyoto and Ise Shrine. Tanigawa further posits that *Tarozaimon* likely would have returned to Seki perhaps with some of his fellow court musicians to teach the locals how to play the music, in effect, a musical workshop where not just those interested may have participated, but rather, the whole town coming together to witness and learn about the various instruments and musical parts. His oral poem to the people of Seki, with the subsequent additions of bamboo flutes, various sized drums, gong and lyrical accompaniment would evolve into a sweeping five-part suite (Takakusu, 1978).

The slow waltz-like cadence of *Tarozaimon*’s ballad to Seki is the catalyst to “flow” for which Turner (pg. 487) describes as a state in which there is “little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future.” While the composition is ten minutes in length, it is performed almost continuously throughout the evening procession, around five hours in total. Jennings (pg. 117) makes an interesting observation about repetition in ritual performance, he writes, “Ritual action does not primarily teach us to see differently but to act differently. It does not provide a point of

view so much as a pattern of doing.” And it is with this pattern of doing that the “participants are free to interpret the movements in ways that are most relevant to their immediate circumstances” (Schnell, pg. 294). And this makes sense when Tanigawa and Kasai (2021) talked about the music initially having been performed only one way, however, each neighborhood over time added their own slight rhythmic variations, time feels, stops and starts, mutated or half-tones, extended chanting and so on, for which this public performance reminds us that a community, is still a collection of persons in search of individual expression (see figure 7).



Figure 7. *Tarozaimon*'s five-part suite with bamboo flutes, drums, gong and lyrical accompaniment.
Photo by Syuzo Kariya.

If there is one special aspect of the Seki *matsuri* that captures the “flow” as Turner describes, it must be the late evening meeting of the four *dashi* in the central square. In this predetermined space and time, the *dashi* with candle-lit red paper lanterns suspended from top to bottom on all sides, appear as glowing-wooden skyscrapers towering over the thousands of onlookers. It has already been four hours, and the “muscle”, the “pullers” and the musicians have been moving, chanting and playing almost non-stop. Now it is time for a little showing off, for the *dashi* can rotate 360 degrees for as long and as fast as the “muscle”

are willing and able to make it happen. Two to three minutes goes by, five minutes more, as the rotations continue, the crowd roars its approval wanting only more of the same. Ten minutes and there’s really no sense of time, all a musician can do is close one’s eyes and play, fingering the notes, or beating the drum, if anything- so as not to become disoriented and fall off. However, the feeling is beyond words. A tremendous pulse of one group in unison with the others, four giant spinning red lanterns glowing for the community and its *kami* (see figure 8).



Figure 8. 舞台回し The *dashi* in full-rotational spin, the red-candle lit lanterns blending into one.
Photo: Kameyama-Kanko.

5. Return and Transformation

How could one not be affected by an experience like this and not be “transformed” if only a little. Tanigawa (2021) remembers so fondly when as a child the main street was a dirt road with the incredible sight of the *dashi* which glowed so bright since there were few lights at night. All he wanted to do, just like all the other kids, was to have the chance to play drums on the giant wooden wagon. He recalled that with too many children waiting in front of him, he never got the chance to ride and perform. However, at the age of forty-one he

fulfilled his childhood dream when after mastering the *matsuri*'s bamboo flute he ascended Kozaki's *dashi* for the very first time. Today he is recognized as one the finest of all Seki *matsuri* flute players, and to our great benefit- passing on his knowledge as master teacher of both flute and drums. Kasai (2021) got his first taste as a *matsuri* musician in the 5th grade, switching to bamboo flute from junior high school, now together with Tanigawa, training new generations of *matsuri* musicians. And so, while the *kami* provides the cause, it is the "flow" as an uplifting experience which draws the people into the "spirit" of the *matsuri*. Set to transform the everyday life of the community, the annual observance of the Seki *matsuri* brings together a community of celebrants, where in a phenomenon described by Campbell (1949), the divine and the human, which normally seem as distinct as night and day, in fact, blend into one. The realm of the sacred is mostly a forgotten dimension of this world we know. The Seki *matsuri* exemplifies the point- that the two kingdoms, are truly one.

Bibliography

- 関町教育委員会 [Seki Town Board of Education]. (1977). 鈴鹿関町文上巻 [History of Suzuka Seki Town, Volume One]. Tokyo, Japan: Nissha Printing Co., Ltd.
- Campbell, J. (1949). *The Hero Has a Thousand Faces*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Hitoshi, M. (2005). *The Mandala of the Mountain: Shugendō and Folk Religion*. (G. Sekimori, Ed. & Trans.). Keio University Press.
- Jennings, T.W. (1982). On Ritual Knowledge. *The Journal of Religion* 62 (2), 111-127.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1203176>
- Kasai, H. & Tanigawa, K. (2021, Nov. 14th, 28th). Personal Communication. Seki town, Mie prefecture, Japan.
- Mahoney, B.J. (2021). Imagining Suzuka no Seki 「遺跡の今昔」. *Department Bulletin of CIER, Mie University* (16), pp. 77-89. <https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/AA12754693>
- Ono, S. (1987). *Shinto: The Kami Way*. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company.
- Schnell, S. (1999). *The Rousing Drum: Ritual Practice in a Japanese Community*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Takakusu. (1978). *Seki Matsuri Musical Score for Flute and Drums*. Seki town, Mie prefecture, Japan. Unpublished.
- Turner, V. (1979). Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 6 (4), 465-499. <http://jstor.org/stable/30233219>