

Sacred Fire

By Tsuneo Yatagai

Fire is a universal phenomenon, and of course there is nothing unique about fire in Japan. But there are some rather unique rituals and festivals involving fire that the Japanese people have continued to practice from ancient times to the present day.

The relationship between human beings and fire runs deep; indeed, the evolution of human beings from apes is said to have taken place because human beings knew how to control fire. Humankind's first experience with fire came from natural phenomena, such as mountain fires and lightning. Later, as the Greek myth of Prometheus tells us, human beings became able to imitate nature and start their own fires.

A Japanese dictionary of the 10th century includes a reference to the act of kindling fire with a ball of crystal. But this method, using the sun's rays, was not common. Before the appearance of matches, the Japanese, like people elsewhere, started their fires either by rubbing implements together to cause friction or by striking metal and stone objects together.

Making a new fire

People had frequently seen sparks created when two trees touched each other, and from this they developed the method of lighting a fire by rubbing pieces of

wood together. Archaeologists have discovered wooden mortars and pestles used for this purpose dating from around AD 100. The pestle would be inserted into a hollow in the mortar and rotated quickly, as a result of which part of the wood would be reduced to powder, carbonize, and then ignite.

Knowing that sparks occurred when a piece of iron hit a stone, ancient people also developed a kindling method by which the sparks from the iron were transferred to a tinder, such as an easily inflammable piece of plant fiber. Equipment for this purpose was imported into Japan from Korea in about the second century. The oldest relics, dating from the New Stone Age, have been unearthed in Britain.

In ancient times the chief priest of Izumo Taisha Shrine in present-day Shimane Prefecture, which is considered to be the oldest shrine in Japan, received special treatment from the Yamato Court because he was the head of Izumo Province and a direct descendant from a god of the mythical age. To this day, when the position of chief priest of Izumo Taisha Shrine is passed on, the shrine holds a solemn ceremony called the "inheritance of the sacred fire".

When a chief priest dies, his successor immediately inherits a fire-drilling mortar and pestle that have been handed down from generation to generation. Two priests take turns to rotate the pestle until a new fire is made. By eating food cooked over the new fire, the successor enters into spiritual communion with the ancestral gods and thereby becomes the new chief priest and spiritual head of the province. The new fire continues to burn constantly within his residence throughout his life, and only the chief priest may partake of food cooked over it. Even his family members are not permitted to use this fire.

This ceremony is mentioned in the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters), the oldest history book in Japan, written in

the eighth century. Though no new fire is started, a similar ceremony takes place when a new emperor is enthroned in Japan. The sound *fi* in the ancient Japanese language originally meant not only fire but also soul and, according to some people, the sun. So the succession of the head of Izumo Province or the enthronement of a new emperor involves the inheritance of fire, soul and sun.

Purification through fire

Since ancient times the Japanese have associated sacredness with natural and pure beauty; for them, an ideal world is synonymous with perfect harmony between humankind and nature. In the real world, however, the spiritual force of life declines with time, and human beings become spiritually weary. The Japanese considered this spiritual weariness to be an impure state, so they held occasional festivals to restore and strengthen the spiritual force of life. For the Japanese, these concepts of purity and impurity, signifying the ebb and flow of the spiritual force of life, are basically religious.

The usual ways of exorcising impurity involved the use of fire, water or salt, all of which are recognized by modern science to be handy methods of disinfection. Fire has the meaning of purifying everything even in the West; it also has a universal connotation in the sense that it symbolizes god's love.

At Suwa Taisha Shrine in Nagano Prefecture, a head shrine with as many as 5,000 branches throughout Japan, four large fir tree pillars stand in the four corners of the main building. They measure as much as 1.5 to 3.3 meters round at the base and 12 to 17 meters in height. In the past there was probably an animistic belief that the gods descended via these pillars.

Every seven years Suwa Taisha Shrine replaces these pillars with new ones from the forest. Before the felling, a ritual takes place in which the axes, hatchets and saws

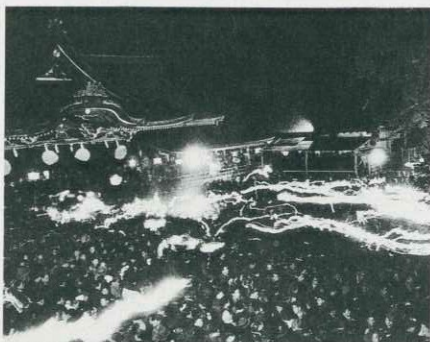


Photo: Ohmiwa Shrine

The Sacred Fire Festival held each year at Miwa Shrine in Nara Prefecture, one of the oldest shrines in Japan.



As a climax to the Buddhist Bon festival in Kyoto, a big bonfire of pine branches is set alight on a mountainside overlooking the city.

that are going to be used in the felling are purified in the flames of a newly created fire. Dressed in white, a blacksmith sits down in front of the bellows and strikes an iron bar placed on an anvil many times. Then, by sprinkling sulfur on the apparently unchanged iron, he creates sparks. This method of making fire is unique to Suwa Taisha Shrine. A stronger fire is started using the sparks and the bellows, and the axes, hatchets and saws are purified by being passed through the flames.

New Fire for the New Year

The ancient Japanese believed that the fire used for purification also lost its power with the passing of time, so they held important rituals to create new fires. Even today such religious places as Izumo Taisha Shrine and Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto hold a New Year ritual in which the priest starts a brand-new fire and passes it on to members of the public, who use it to cook their first meal of the new year.

Miwa Shrine in Nara Prefecture, one of the oldest shrines in Japan, holds a Sacred Fire Festival every year. At 11:40 p.m. on December 31, the priests of the shrine enter the hill behind the hall of worship, which is forbidden territory for others, and in the darkness ignite a fire. In the past they used the old wooden mortar and pestle method, but the wooded area is very damp in the winter, making it difficult to light a fire. So now they reportedly use a flint.

At midnight, a drum is beaten, and the priests transfer the newly born fire to each of the shrine's lanterns and finally to a large torch in the shrine's precincts. Members of the public, who have gathered at the shrine for the occasion, then light their own small torches or tapers from the large torch and head home, waving the tapers round and round to keep the fire alive. The rows of lights dancing their way through the dark streets give people the sensation of having returned to ancient times. In the past, there was a custom in which the first young person to return to a neighboring village with a burning fire was considered to be the village's hero and received a prize.

After returning home with the sacred fire, people offer it to the family altar and then use it to cook the first meal of the new year. The shrine's large torch, meanwhile, is carried by young people to branches of the shrine in the vicinity, arriving back at the main shrine at about 4 a.m. to bring the ceremony to a close.

Influence of Buddhism

In ancient Japan various events were held throughout the country in which fire was looked on as sacred. The ancient Japanese lit fires to welcome and see off the gods and made predictions for a year according to the strength of the fire or direction of the smoke at New Year's.

After the introduction of Buddhism via China, Japan copied many fire-related customs from India and central Asia. In Buddhism fire is thought to destroy the evil passions of humans, to lighten up the darkness, which symbolizes humankind's stupidity, and to indicate the wisdom of Buddha.

Several Buddhist events involving fire are carried on to this day, including the *mando-e* (lantern lighting ceremony), in which temples light many lanterns around their grounds as an offering to Buddha; a *goma* (from the Sanskrit word *homa* meaning to burn) ceremony, influenced by Zoroastrianism, in which a special fire is lit and prayers are offered to Buddha; and a ceremony in which people walk across the smoldering ashes after a *goma* ceremony.

The *goma* ceremony usually takes place in front of a statue of Buddha in an esoteric Buddhist temple, though some-

times it is held outdoors. Among the outdoor ceremonies, recently the large-scale Star Festival of the Agon sect of new Buddhism has become a popular tourist attraction in Kyoto. As many as 35 million wooden boards are burned in a ceremony lasting about 10 hours. The boards each measure 20 centimeters in length and carry the written wishes of believers, such as the desire for world peace. This year a total of 530,000 people gathered to see this fire ceremony.

In the Buddhist Bon festival, which is held in the summer to worship ancestors, families burn fires to welcome and bid farewell to the souls of the dead. In Kyoto the festival has taken on a grand scale. On the slope of a mountain that can be seen from the center of the city, pine branches are laid out in the shape of the Chinese character for *dai* (which looks like a person standing with his legs stretched out and means "great"), extending for more than 100 meters, and then burned for all to see in the city below.

Despite being regarded as a Buddhist event, however, the Bon festival has its roots in the ancient religious beliefs and practices of the Japanese, whose basic perception of fire has remained unchanged since ancient times. The custom of welcoming back the souls of ancestors is unique to the innate Japanese faith, which has no concept of heaven or hell. Even though the Bon festival is a religious event involving fire, it differs fundamentally from Buddhism. ■

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