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# The Suwa Pillar Festival Revisited

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THE black, grey, and off-white tonalities of Japan's angular city-scapes of steel, concrete, and glass make a striking contrast with the lush greens, smoky blues, and purples of the countryside, much of it mountainous, and about sixty-seven per cent of it still covered with trees. Traditionally regarded as a realm located between this world and the next, and as a resting place for the spirits of the dead making their way to the realm of the spirits, and for *kami* descending to earth, forested mountains have held an important place in the spiritual and emotional lives of the Japanese from time immemorial. The Japanese sense of the sacred, and the beautiful, is closely linked to mountains and trees.

Of all natural entities, the individual tree has traditionally been one of the common objects of *kami* worship. An exceptionally imposing tree may be regarded as a *shintai* 神体, a dwelling place for a *kami*, or as a *yorishiro* 衣代, the means the *kami* uses to descend to the earth. Whether *shintai* or *yorishiro*, from such a tree emanates a

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sacred aura, and its sacrality is attested to by a *shimenawa* wound about its trunk.<sup>1</sup>

An unusual, and yet classic example of “tree worship” in modern Japan exists in Kami Suwa (“Upper Suwa” 上諏訪) and Shimo Suwa (“Lower Suwa” 下諏訪), adjoining hot springs towns located along the shores of Suwa Lake in Nagano prefecture in central Honshū. This worship centers upon a festival known as the Pillar Festival (*onbashira-matsuri* 御柱祭り or *onbashira-sai* 御柱祭).

The landscape of the Suwa Lake basin and its surrounding mountains is not one that promises unlimited vistas and opportunities. For the pre-modern inhabitants of the land, the mountains that surrounded Suwa basin were in the past both a barrier to transportation and communication with other localities, and a defense against rival clans. Covered with forest and often swathed in mist, the mountains have been a place of mystery, which, seemingly, contributed to a vigorous *kami* cult. The many religious activities surrounding the enshrinement of the *kami* enhance the sense of mystery through numerous ancient rituals that antedate the beginning of historical record keeping.

Although the surrounding mountain landscape is beautiful, and the lakeshore affords attractive scenery for travel brochure photographs, up close on the ground Kami Suwa and Shimo Suwa are much like any other Japanese town. Houses and shops are crowded close together, and traffic along the narrow roads running through the rice paddies outside the towns is heavy with cars, trucks, and motorbikes. Home to a number of high tech industries, the towns enjoy relatively clean air, but citizens are concerned about water pollution.

In this setting, once every seven years, some 2,000 active participants are joined by up to 200,000 viewer-participants in the celebration of a festival held ostensibly to fulfill a pledge made by a general in the eighth century to rebuild the shrines of the local deity. Sixteen specially selected fir trees are cut down in the mountains and their trunks are dragged over miles of rough terrain to Kami Suwa and Shimo Suwa, where they are erected in the courtyards of

<sup>1</sup> *Shimenawa* 注連縄 is a sacred, twisted straw rope hung with white paper cuttings (*shide* 紙垂), which is used to demarcate a place inhabited by a *kami*.

the four shrines that constitute the Suwa Shrine.<sup>2</sup>

By viewing this festival from the vantage points of 1) the myths, legends, and history of the Suwa Shrine, 2) the structure of the festival today, and 3) historical and contemporary perspectives of the festival as expressed in written documents and in films, I hope to suggest a possible relationship between landscape, nature, and culture in this Japanese community and by extension to probe the depth and strength of Shintō traditions in late twentieth-century Japan.

The Suwa Shrine, home of the deity Takeminakata-no-kami 建御名方神, is of special interest because it is one of three “nation founding shrines” (*kunizukuri jinja* 国作り神社, i.e., Ise, Izumo, and Suwa), where tree trunks shaped into pillars play an important ritualistic role, and it is the only one where the pillars are erected and exposed in the shrine precincts and replaced every seven years in an elaborate festival organized by shrine parishioners (*ujiko* 氏子). The pillar of the Ise Shrine, dedicated to Amaterasu-o-mikami, clan deity of the Yamato clan and the Imperial Household, is not visible but is buried in the ground next to the main shrine building. At the Izumo Shrine, dedicated to Ōkuninushi-no-kami, the pillars are incorporated into the structure of the shrine itself.

#### SUWA BASIN AND THE MYTHS, LEGENDS, AND HISTORY OF THE SUWA SHRINE

Suwa County (Suwa-gun), consisting of Kami Suwa (also called simply, Suwa), Shimo Suwa, Okaya City, Chino City, Fujimichō, and Hara Village (combined population of 135,000), lies in a graben basin. Set at the crossroads of the old Nakasendō and Kōshū Kaidō highways, two of the five official highways of the Tokugawa period (1600–1868), Suwa was a way station for travelers in pre-modern times.<sup>3</sup> With its many hot springs, Suwa was an attractive

<sup>2</sup> The Suwa Jinja is a shrine with two seats (*niza issha* 二座一社), consisting of the Kamisha 上社 (Upper Shrine) in Kami Suwa, and the Shimosha 下社 (Lower Shrine) in Shimo Suwa. Each of the shrines in turn is made up of two shrine buildings: the Hon Miya 本宮 (Main Shrine) and the Mae Miya 前宮 (referring to the fact that it was erected before the Hon Miya) at the Kamisha; and the Haru Miya 春宮 (Spring Shrine) and the Aki Miya 秋宮 (Autumn Shrine) at the Shimosha.

<sup>3</sup> All five highways began at Nihonbashi in Edo. The Nakasendō ran northwest through

resting site, and today the traveler pulling into Shimo Suwa Station on the JR Chūō Line is still welcomed by a hot spring bathhouse located right on the train platform.

Suwa Lake, a twenty-five foot deep, 5.4 square mile lake, lies in the western part of the Suwa Basin. Its circumference of eleven miles is dotted with hotels, erected for the visitors who come in the summer to enjoy boating and fishing, and, in the past, before the climate warmed and the lake stopped freezing over, ice-fishing and ice-skating in the winter.<sup>4</sup> When the lake froze, the booming of the cracking ice traveled far and wide in the frosty atmosphere. Local legend has it that it was the god Takeminakata-no-kami, leaving his home in the Kamisha, south of the lake and making his way across the frozen surface to visit his consort Yasakatomenokata-no-kami 八坂刀売神 in the Shimosha, six miles away on the lake's northern shore. The cracking, which sent blocks of ice jutting skyward, was called the "divine crossing" (*miwatari* 御渡り) and divination rites, conducted by Shintō priests and attended by reverent *ujiko*, were held at the lakeside to witness the revelations of the *kami*.

An abundant supply of water makes Suwa a good rice-producing area, and rice paddies line the narrow two-lane highway that connects the communities in the basin. During the Meiji and Taishō periods the Suwa basin was an important silk producing center.<sup>5</sup> Today it is a center of production of precision instruments and home to Seikō Epson (maker of watches and computers), Chinon (lenses and camera parts), Casio (calculators), Yashika (lenses and

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the mountainous terrain of central Honshū, to Kyoto, with sixty-seven post stations en route. The Kōshū Kaidō was a shorter road that passed through Kobotoke and Kōfu and ended at Suwa, where it joined the Nakasendō.

<sup>4</sup> Higher water temperatures, due in part to increased amounts of algae stimulated by waste waters from the hotels, highland villas, and local factories have prevented the lake from freezing in recent decades.

<sup>5</sup> Dubbed "the Silk Kingdom" (*shiruku ōkoku Suwa* シルク王国諏訪), the Suwa basin was the site of many silk thread factories. By 1930 in Okaya City alone there were 214 factories, with a labor force of 38,000 workers, many of them adolescent girls from poor farm families in Nagano and Gifu prefectures. The demand for Japanese silk fell during the world depression, declined further with the production of artificial silk and nylon in Europe and America, and ceased entirely during the Pacific War, when the mulberry trees were cut down to make room for vegetable gardens. (Aihara Masayoshi 相原正義 and Matsumura Yoshirō 松本吉郎, *Chūō Kōchi*, *Hokuriku* 中央高地北陸, vol. 6 of *Nihon no chiri* (Ayumi shuppan, 1990), pp. 88–92.

cameras),<sup>6</sup> Olympus (optics), Tokyo Hatsudōki (engines), Sankei Seiki (music boxes), and numerous smaller enterprises.<sup>7</sup>

These industries have not altered the essential aspects of the area's physical beauty, however. The graceful slopes of the Yatsugatake ("eight peaks") Range 八ヶ岳 still mark the eastern horizon, and the curtains of mist that shade the dense vegetation of nearby Kirigamine ("misty peak") Heights 霧ヶ峰 especially in spring, are as eerily attractive as ever.

The two buildings of the Suwa Kamisha shrine stand at the foot of Moriya Mountain 守屋山, a small, vaguely conical, heavily wooded mountain rising from the Suwa flatland.<sup>8</sup> There is no *honden* 本殿 or main shrine building in either the Hon Miya or the Mae Miya of the Kamisha, for the mountain itself is considered to be the *kami's* shrine. A small ancient stone shrine (*hokora* 祠), called the Misayama Shrine 御射山社, on its slope marks Moriya Mountain as a *shintai* inhabited by a *kami*.

This Misayama Shrine is said to date from the time when the original inhabitants of the place, led by the Moreya clan 洩矢族, worshiped the mountain deity (*mishaguji* ミシヤグヂ), before invading people from Izumo came to the area, bringing with them their own clan deity, Takeminakata.<sup>9</sup> The story of Takeminakata, later also known as Suwa Daimyōjin 諏訪大明神, is recorded in the "Land Ceding" chapters of the first book of the *Kojiki* (712). His tale repeats and continues a pattern of contestation, defeat, and banishment that began when his early ancestor, the Storm God Susanoo-o-

<sup>6</sup> Merged with Kyōcera in 1983.

<sup>7</sup> During the war Nagano, encircled by mountains, was designated by the central government as a site for factory relocation. Okaya, together with Matsumoto and Shiojiri, became a center for the production of aircraft parts, electronics, and communications equipment. Tōkyō Shibaura Denki, Seikō Epson, and other companies from Tokyo took over the vacated silk mills and turned out binoculars, bomb sights, timers, wireless radios, and other war-related equipment. Many of these companies stayed on after the war.

<sup>8</sup> Moriya Mountain (Moriya-san) is a sacred mountain of the type that would be categorized as a *kannabi-yama* 神南備山: a small mountain, enveloped in greenery, adjacent to the flatlands, that stands out conspicuously from the surroundings and gives the impression of a place that *kami* might inhabit. For a discussion of the typology of mountains in Japan see Takahiko Higuchi, *The Visual and Spatial Structure of Landscapes* (originally published in Japanese as *Keikan no kōzō*), trans. Charles Terry (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1933), pp. 164-65.

<sup>9</sup> Takemura Yoshiyuki 竹村美幸, *Suwa Myōjin* (Okaya City, Nagano Prefecture: Suwa bunkasha, 1992), pp. 41-43.

mikami, was exiled from the High Plain of Heaven for committing ritual offenses against his sister the Sun Goddess Amaterasu-o-mikami. Following his exile, Susanoo made his way to Izumo on the Japan Sea, where his son Ōkuninushi-no-kami founded the kingdom of Izumo, the Central Land of the Reed Plains. Takeminakata's name appears in chapters 35 and 36 of Book One of the *Kojiki*, where Amaterasu sends her messenger the thunder god Takemikazuchi-no-kami 建御雷神 to demand that the Central Land of the Reed Plains be turned over to her.<sup>10</sup> Ōkuninushi-no-kami and his elder son Yaekotoshironushi-no-kami are ready to hand over the land to the messenger, but the hot-headed younger son Takeminakata gruffly refuses.<sup>11</sup> "Bearing a tremendous boulder on his fingertips," Takeminakata challenges Takemikazuchi to a wrestling match to settle the dispute.<sup>12</sup> When Takeminakata grabs the thunder god's arm, it changes magically into a column of ice, and then into a sword blade, but when Takemikazuchi seizes the arm of Takeminakata, he crushes it as if it were a young reed, and tosses it aside. Pursued by Takemikazuchi, Takeminakata runs as far as Suwa Lake in the land of Shinano and pleads for his life, promising never to leave the place and never to disobey the commands of Ōkuninushi or the words of Yaekotoshironushi and to yield the Central Land of the Reed Plains "in accordance with the commands of the offspring of the heavenly deities."<sup>13</sup>

Scholars have detected in the interstices of this mythologized account the outlines of a narrative telling of a pre-historic struggle between Yamato immigrants of the Ō 大 clan, who worshiped Takemikazuchi, and members of the Izumo clan, who claimed

<sup>10</sup> Donald Philippi, trans., *Kojiki* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1968), pp. 129–33.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130. Philippi analyzes the name Yaekotoshironushi into the components "eight layers," i.e., many dimensions (*ya pe* 八重), "thing" or "word" (*koto* 事), "to know" (*shiro* 代), and "possessor" (*nushi* 主) and notes that the name has often been interpreted as the name of a deity of words or oracular pronouncements; hence, Ōkuninushi's eagerness to consult this son before making a decision (*ibid.*, p. 636).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132. Philippi cites Matsumura Takeo's interpretation of the boulder as a display of strength meant to intimidate the heavenly messenger and the wrestling contest as a form of litigation to be settled by divine will.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133. The name Takeminakata is constituted of words that mean, separately, "valiant" (*take* 武), "name" (*na* 名), and "direction" (*kata* 方). His name can also be interpreted to mean "by the side" (*kata* 方) of the water (*mina* 水). (*Ibid.*, p. 559.)

descent from Takeminakata, for control of the region of Suwa.<sup>14</sup> Seemingly, the struggle between the Yamato clan and the people of Izumo, reflected in the Land Ceding chapters of the *Kojiki* (a document recorded by Yasumaro of the Ō clan), was continued from Izumo to Suwa, where the two tribes were eventually amalgamated.

According to an account (combining myth, local legend, and folklore) narrated by Takemura Yoshiyuki in his book *Suwa Myōjin* (The Suwa Deity), members of the Izumo tribe traveled by boat from Izumo (present day Shimane prefecture) northward along the Japan Sea coast to Etsu-no-kuni 越の国 (present day Niigata prefecture), where Ōkuninushi wed Nunakawa-hime 奴奈川姫, the daughter of the Etsu-no-kuni chieftain. Nunakawa-hime subsequently gave birth to Takeminakata south of Itoigawa, where the Himegawa River (“Princess River”) flows into the Japan Sea. The migrant Izumo tribe then followed the same river south to Suwa, taking with them their deity Takeminakata.<sup>15</sup> Armed with metal weapons (the making of which the Izumo people are said to have learned from Koreans), and possessing agricultural skills unknown to the inhabitants of the Suwa basin, the Izumo tribe was able to overwhelm the local Moreya clan, who still used weapons and tools of stone. Takeminakata was installed in what was later the Mae Miya as the guardian deity of the Izumo people and eventually of all who dwelled in the area.<sup>16</sup>

Local landmarks have been interpreted in light of this myth. A shrine dedicated to Nunakawa-hime stands in Itoigawa City where

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 132. A similar interpretation is put forward by Miyasaka Mitsuaki 宮坂光昭 in “Suwa Taisha Amaterasu e no hangyaku kami” 諏訪大社天照への反逆神, *Rekishu dokuhon* v. 33 (February 1989), p. 63. Later the two competing groups were amalgamated. Felicia Gressit Bock points out that Takemikazuchi-no-mikoto was an ancestral *kami* of the Fujiwara. See her translation, *Engi-Shiki, Procedures of the Engi Era, Books VI-X* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1972), p. 100.

<sup>15</sup> Takemura, pp. 26–28. The spiritual head of the invading clan came to be known as the *ohōri* (synonymous with *hafuri*: one who purifies). He was regarded as a *kami* in human form (*arahitogami* 現人神), descended from the clan *kami* (*ujigami* 氏神), Takeminakata. The Suwa *ohōri*, in whom it was believed the *kami* resided, ascended to his official position as an eight-year old child.

<sup>16</sup> Today Takeminakata is enshrined in the Hon Miya and Yasakatome-no-kata is enshrined in the Mae Miya. Both *kami*, together with Yaekotoshironushi, are enshrined in the Shimosha Haru Miya and Aki Miya. Their names appear at the beginning of Miyasaka Kiyomichi’s 宮坂清通 *Suwa no onbashira-sai* (Ōyō shobō, 1956).



the Himegawa River flows into the Japan Sea. A pond, located south of Itoigawa City and marked by a small shrine, is said to be the birthing pond where she gave birth to Takeminakata. Another shrine dedicated to Nunakawa-hime is found in Suwa, and the sharp depressions found on a large stone there are said to be the hoofprints of the deer that she rode when she came to Suwa. Both it and the large, flat, bench-like “shoe rock” (*kutsu-ishi* 沓石), where she is said to have sat down and changed her shoes, are enclosed by small wooden fences to mark them as sacred spots.<sup>17</sup>

Takeminakata’s consort Yasakatome-no-kata is said to have been originally a local agricultural *kami* appropriated by the Izumo invaders.<sup>18</sup> The deities are said to spend the warmer months of the year in the Haru Miya and winter in the Aki Miya. They are transferred from the Aki Miya to the Haru Miya in a quiet ritual (*sengū-sai* 遷宮祭) performed by priests on February 1, and returned to the Aki Miya in a noisy “boat festival” (*funa matsuri* 船祭り) on August 1.<sup>19</sup> After the harvest, Yasakatome-no-kata’s spirit is said to return to Kirigamine Heights, located behind the Aki Miya and named after the mists that periodically slip down from its top, hiding its form from view. Said to be the daughter of the sea god, Yasakatome-no-

<sup>17</sup> Takemura, pp. 29–30.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51. The origin of this *kami* is unclear. Takemura says that, according to one explanation, she was the ancestral *kami* of the Yasukumo 安曇 clan, a rice-growing people that at one time occupied the land north of Lake Suwa.

<sup>19</sup> Miyasaka Mitsuki, *Suwa Taisha no onbashira to nenjū gyōji* 諏訪大社の御柱と年中行事 (Matsumoto City, Nagano Prefecture: Kyōdo shuppansha, 1992), p. 112. In the “boat festival” *ujiko* transport the *kami* in a large brushwood boat decorated with the masks of an old woman and an old man carrying a fishing pole. Hundreds of *ujiko* are required to carry their brushwood boat, it is said, because they are reluctant to return to their winter home. Until 1877 the boat was carried by *ujiko* clad in loin cloths and was famous as the “Suwa Naked Festival” (“*Suwa Hadaka Matsuri*” 諏訪裸祭り). The rite is noted in *Suwa daimyōjin ekotoba*, 諏訪大明神絵詞, 1356. Shintō deities are sometimes described as traveling through the sky in boats. Takemikazuchi-no-kami, for example, rides the “heavenly bird-boat *kami*” Ame-no-tori-fune-no-kami 天鳥船神, when he descends to earth from the heavens. (Philippi, *Kojiki*, p. 129.)

In the transfer of the deities between the Aki Miya and the Haru Miya one can see vestiges of the belief, found throughout rural Japan, in the protective presence of the ancestral *kami*, who resides in the mountains as the *yama no kami* 山の神 in the winter and descends to the rice fields as the *ta no kami* 田の神 in the spring. Takeminakata is also spoken of as an agricultural *kami*, and today the *taue-matsuri* 田植祭り (rice planting festival) is conducted at the Kamisha. This would appear to be a further demonstration of the highly adaptive nature of Japanese *kami*.

kata is also believed to send the rains needed to grow the rice.

Numerous other small shrines and *himorogi* 神籬 (sacred seats on unpolluted land surrounded by evergreens or marked by low wooden fences) scattered throughout the basin tell the location of other sacred spots, such as the “seven rocks,” upon which *kami* are said to have sat, and the “seven trees,” in which *kami* are supposed to have rested. And within the compounds of the Kamisha and Shimosha shrines, *shimenawa* wound about the thick middles of hoary fir trees indicate that some spaces within the sanctified grounds have more spiritual energy than others.

In the variegated career of the Suwa *kami* can be glimpsed the concerns of the inhabitants of the Suwa basin at different points in time. Winter rites held today in the Kamisha, in which deer heads and freshly caught frogs impaled on arrows are presented to the *kami*, harken back to a time in the neolithic Jōmon period when people lived by gathering and hunting, and the Moreya chieftain’s functions included divination and the performance of magical rites.<sup>20</sup> Later, with the introduction of rice cultivation in the Yayoi period, the Suwa deity became a wind *kami* and received the prayers of farmers anxious to control the winds and heavy rainstorms that wreaked havoc on their crops.<sup>21</sup>

The *kami* was petitioned for good crops and many important agricultural rites were conducted at the Shimosha. One of these, still observed today, is the “Cylinder Gruel Rite” (*tsutsugayu-shinji* 筒粥神事), held in the Tsutsugayu Hall of the Haru Miya from evening of January 14 to the dawn of the next day.<sup>22</sup>

People also turned to the Suwa *kami* in times of sickness. Suwa medicine, regarded as a gift from Takeminakata, included antidotes

<sup>20</sup> Miyasaka Mitsuki, “Suwa Taisha,” pp. 68–69. Miyasaka suggests that the origin of these rites dates back to a time before the arrival of the Izumo people and their *kami*, Takeminakata. Once the Moreya people were defeated by the invaders, they were assimilated into the new tribe, and practices associated with the worship of their local *kami* became part of the cult surrounding Takeminakata.

<sup>21</sup> Takemura (p. 156) notes that the seal of the Kamisha is made of deer antler and has as its impression a picture, whereas that of the Shimosha, associated with the later rice-planting culture, is made of bronze and has as its impression several modified Chinese characters.

<sup>22</sup> Miyasaka Mitsuki, *Suwa Taisha*, pp. 23–28. In this rite hollow reeds are placed in a porridge of rice and beans, which is left to cook all night; at dawn the reeds are sliced open before the *kami*. The disposition of their contents is said to augur the harvest of the coming year.

for ailments ranging from bruises and insect bites to female hysteria, night crying, and fox possession.<sup>23</sup>

In time the Suwa *kami* became famous for services rendered to the imperial court as well.<sup>24</sup> Emissaries from the court were sent to offer prayers at the Suwa Shrine, and the Suwa *kami* appeared in legends recounting deeds of members of the imperial clan. When Empress Jingū (201–269) invaded Silla in the third century, she is said to have been accompanied by the Suwa *kami*, who in its capacity as Wind God made favorable winds blow, speeding the fleet on to the Korean peninsula. Flocks of hawks, pigeons, herons, and crows are said to have flown in the sky, and large fish and sea creatures surfaced on the waves to protect the expeditionary fleet. The Suwa *kami* itself is said to have led the way, riding in a boat that flew its flag with the mulberry-leaf crest.<sup>25</sup>

The same mulberry-leaf crest appeared also on the coat of arms of the mysterious war chief who reportedly came to the aid of Sakanoue Tamuramaro 坂上田村麻呂 (758–811), who had been commissioned by the court to subjugate the barbarian tribes in the northeast territory. Thanks to this mysterious chieftain, who was always in the forefront of the battles, performing many valiant deeds, Tamuramaro vanquished the barbarian tribes. On the way back to Kyoto, when they arrived at the border of Suwa, the mysterious warrior is said to have announced, “I am the Suwa *kami*” and immediately vanished. Tamuramaro was greatly moved and ordered that contributions be made throughout Shinano province to rebuild the Suwa Shrine every seven years. According to the same legend, later on when the cost of rebuilding the shrines became prohibitive, sixteen pillars were erected instead.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Miyasaka Mitsuaki, “Suwa Taisha,” p. 70. Ingredients included bear gall, monkey womb, snake blood, roasted deer head, and mountain goat horn. Another rite performed to ensure good health is the rite of walking through a giant wheel woven of miscanthus reed (*chinowa* 茅の輪) at the time of the summer solstice. This and the great exorcism conducted at the end of the year are important means of driving out pollution at half-year intervals throughout Japan.

<sup>24</sup> The first official reference to the Suwa Shrine dates back to the *Nihon shoki* (721), wherein Empress Jitō (645–702) is said to have sent an imperial messenger to worship at the shrine. Legendary events alleged to have taken place before that time are described in *Suwa Daimyōjin ekotoba*.

<sup>25</sup> Miyasaka Mitsuaki, “Suwa Taisha,” p. 64.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.

These exploits of the *kami* were rewarded early on. In 940 when an imperial petition made to the Suwa *kami* was followed by the quelling of the uprising led by Taira Masakado (d. 940), the imperial court bestowed upon Takeminakata the exalted rank of Senior First Rank and Yasakatome-no-kata was promoted to Junior Lower Fifth Rank.

By the end of the Heian period (794–1185) Takeminakata had acquired a reputation as a powerful war god. In *Ryōjin hishō* (ca. 1169), for example, the Suwa *kami* is noted as one of the outstanding war gods of eastern Japan.<sup>27</sup> The Suwa Shrines continued to occupy a position of high esteem among the military aristocracy throughout the Kamakura and Ashikaga periods (1185–1573). Members of the Suwa clan (reputed descendants of Takeminakata himself) rendered military service to the Minamoto, Hōjō, and Ashikaga families. The Kamisha and Shimosha were among twelve shrines especially patronized by Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–1199),<sup>28</sup> and the Suwa *kami* was also the object of special devotion on the part of Kiso Yoshinaka (1154–1184), the Minamoto rebel warrior who was at one time married to the daughter of the chief priest (*ohōri* 大祝) of the Kamisha.<sup>29</sup> During the medieval era samurai from Shinshū 信州 and Kōshū 甲州 gathered at Suwa to hunt, feast, and show off their military skills before bakufu officials at exhibition matches held on Kirigamine Heights, near the shrine of the Misayama earth deity, whose identity had by then been amalgamated with that of the war god Takeminakata, enshrined in the Shimosha at the foot of the mountain.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> See the translation of the song in which the Suwa *kami* is thus named in Yung-Hee Kim, *Songs to Make the Dust Dance, The Ryōjin hishō of Twelfth Century Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 144.

<sup>28</sup> Itō Tomio 井藤富尾, *Misayama-sai no hanashi* 御射山祭の話し (Shimo Suwa, Nagano Prefecture: Heute Misayama, 1958), pp. 5–6.

<sup>29</sup> Takemura, pp. 92–93. After the death of his father Minamoto Yoshikata at the hand of Taira Yoshihira, Yoshinaka was raised by Nakahara Kanetoshi at a shrine in Kiso and by the *ohōri* of the Shimosha, Kanazashi Morikiyo. Upon attaining manhood Yoshinaka married the daughter of the Shimosha *ohōri* and with the backing of his in-laws proceeded to raise an army of Shinano samurai to lead against the Taira. After a series of famous battles, recounted in the *Heike monogatari*, he succeeded in driving the Taira forces from Kyoto in 1183. Jealous and alarmed by his cousin's excesses, Minamoto Yoritomo sent an army against Yoshinaka. The story of Yoshinaka's death and that of his foster-brother Imai Kanehira, who committed suicide at his side, is the subject of the noh play *Kanehira*.

<sup>30</sup> Itō, p. 7. The area on top of Kirigamine is now a nature preserve, but the viewing ter-



of the clan and became a popular center of worship for local folk. The Tokugawa bakufu assisted with the reconstruction of the Shimosha, contributed gates to the Kamisha, and eventually in 1648 gave the shrines an annual stipend of 1500 *koku*, making them a small fiefdom, independent of the Takashima clan.

In 1871, in the wake of the Meiji restoration, the Suwa shrines, together with all other major shrines in the land, came under the direct control of the Meiji government.<sup>33</sup> In 1872 the Kamisha and Shimosha were amalgamated and the Suwa Shrine was designated as a National Shrine of the Middle Rank (*kokuhei chūsha* 国幣中社); in 1896, it was promoted to the position of an Imperial Shrine of the Middle Rank (*kanpei chūsha* 官幣中社), and in 1916, it was elevated to the position of Imperial Shrine of the Top Rank (*kanpei taisha* 官幣大社), a status second only to that held by the Ise Shrine. With the dissolution of the state shrine system after the Pacific War, the Suwa Shrine became a religious corporation, supported by a parishioner association (*ujikokai* 氏子会) constituted of representatives selected from local towns and villages. In 1948 it was granted permission by the Jinja Honchō 神社本庁 (Association of Shintō Shrines) to use the appellation of Suwa Taisha 諏訪大社 (the only shrine in Nagano prefecture to possess the title of Great Shrine), and today it is the main shrine of all the Suwa branch shrines in the nation.<sup>34</sup>

In the early part of the twentieth century, the Suwa *kami* became a *kami* of craftsmanship. Today, Takeminakata is a *kami* of high tech manufacturing and traffic safety. Nonetheless, the war-like rhythms beaten out on giant-sized drums before the railroad station on the morning of the day the pillars are to be pulled into the town recall an age when samurai beat their drums along the lakeshore to call the *kami* to arms. And banners and *onbe* おんべ (large *gohei* 御幣, i.e.,

<sup>33</sup> The institution of the *ohōri* was abandoned at this time and Shintō priests appointed by the government were assigned to the Suwa Shrines. For an account of the status and administration of Shintō in the modern era see Helen Hardacre, *Shintō and the State, 1868–1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>34</sup> If one includes shrines that have no priests in attendance, and shrines that once were called Suwa Jinja but now go by other names, the total number of Suwa shrines comes to 10,000, according to Miyasaka Mitsuaki, “Suwa Taisha,” p. 64. Helen Hardacre outlines the ways in which branch shrines developed in the medieval period as follows: “(1) when clans or their subgroupings migrated to a new area and established a new shrine of the clan deity; 2) through the dedication of fiefs to shrines; 3) through the appearance of worshippers of the original shrine’s deities in a distant area.” (*Shintō and the State, 1868–1988*, p. 12.)

paper streamers attached to a stick, used especially in the *onbashira matsuri*) flying in the stiff breezes blowing down the mountains and off the lake remind us that some of the power of the Suwa *kami* still resides in the wind.

Here, once every seven years, some 2,000 Suwa Shrine *ujiko* are joined by about 150,000–200,000 spectators to celebrate the Suwa Pillar Festival.<sup>35</sup> The festival is organized about a series of rituals that begin three years earlier, when eight trees from Okoya Mountain 御小屋山 east of Suwa in the foothills of the Yatsugatake Range, approximately twenty kilometers away, are selected by a group of hereditary shrine wood keepers (*yamazukuri* 山作り) to serve as pillars to be erected in the courtyards of the Hon Miya and Mae Miya of the Kamisha. Two years before the festival *ujiko* and priests affiliated with the Shimosha proceed approximately ten kilometers north-east to the Higashi Mata National Forest 東俣国有林 and select eight trees to be erected as pillars in the Haru Miya and Aki Miya. (See Figure 1.)

The mirroring of the Kamisha by the Shimosha is reflected in their virtually identical mulberry-leaf crests, different only in that the crest of the Kamisha has four stems and that of the Shimosha, five. As their crests are slightly different mirror images of one another, so the rituals of the Kamisha differ somewhat from those of the Shimosha. In almost every case, the Kamisha ritual takes place before the corresponding ritual at the Shimosha. The mirroring principle can also be seen in the three pairs of Treasure Halls (*hōden* 宝殿), where the jewel representing the spirit of the *kami* and gifts offered to the *kami* are stored. There are two Treasure Halls at the

<sup>35</sup> The term *ujiko*, literally, children of the clan (*uji*), today refers to shrine parishioners who have traditional ties to the local tutelary shrine and support its functions. Shrine elders (*ujiko sōdai* 氏子総代), who are most directly concerned with shrine affairs, are men of well-established families whose roots in the community go back many generations. The *ujigami* (also called *chinjūgami* 鎮守神) today refers to the local tutelary deity that protects the people dwelling within its area, irrespective of their diverse lineages. The *ujigami* in this sense may be different from the *ubusuna no kami*, the tutelary deity of one's birth place. One can thus at the same time be a patron parishioner (*ujiko*) of one of the four Suwa Shrines and a parishioner (*ubuko*) of the *ubusuna* shrine of one's natal place. Explanations of membership in *ujiko* associations can be found in Jennifer Robertson, *Native and Newcomer, Making and Remaking a Japanese City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) and Winston Davis, *Japanese Religion and Society, Paradigms of Structure and Change* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

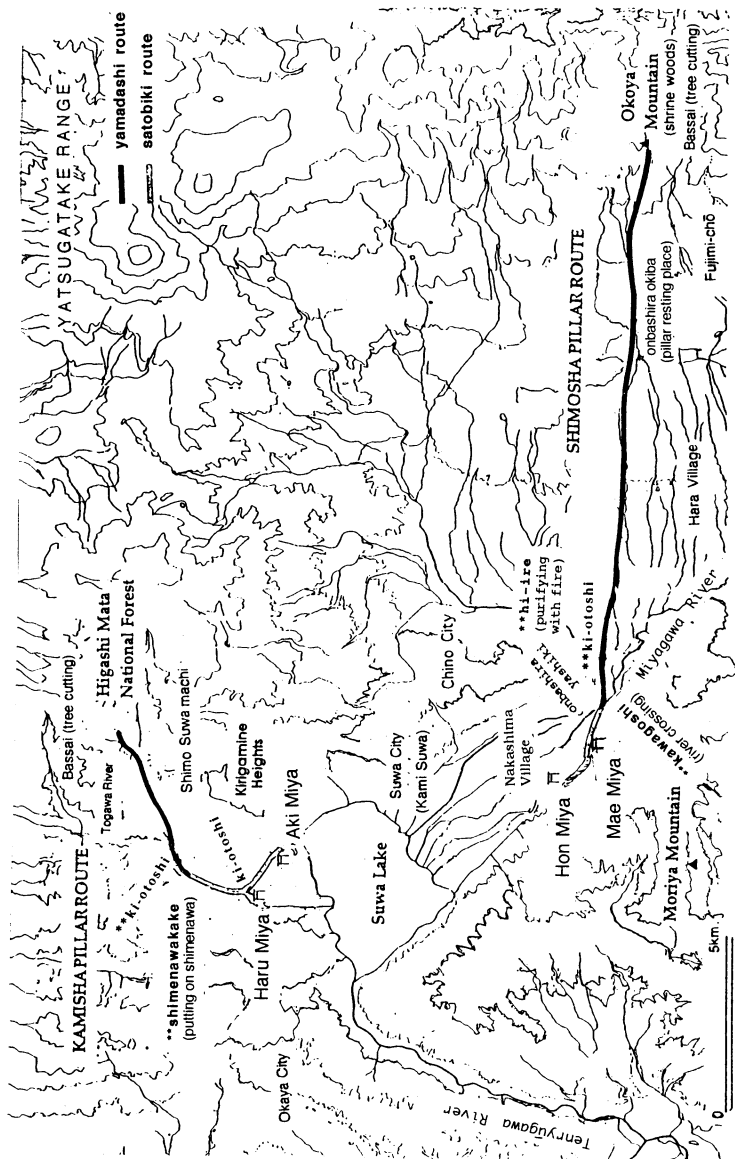


Figure 1. Map of the Suwa area with Pillar Routes indicated. Courtesy of the Suwa City Museum, Suwa City, Nagano Prefecture.



Kamisha Hon Miya and two each at the Shimosha Haru Miya and Aki Miya. One of each of these three pairs is rebuilt each time the Pillar Festival is conducted. While *ujiko* are engaged in pulling sixteen tree trunks down from the mountains, the shrine priests supervise the construction of exact replicas of the old Treasure Halls. At the conclusion of the festival, they move the *kami* from the old Treasure Halls into the new ones in a solemn ceremony (*sengū-sai*).

The Suwa Pillar Festival, which takes place from January to May, is sponsored, organized, conducted, and paid for entirely by *ujiko* from the twenty-five parishes affiliated with the Suwa Taisha (eighteen with the Kamisha and seven with the Shimosha). Savings accumulated over the course of seven years are spent on elaborate activities connected with the festival. These include parades organized to greet the pillars and several straight days of feasting and drinking at the climax of the festival when the pillars are dragged through the town. The physical, emotional, and financial costs associated with the festival are so great, in fact, that there is a traditional taboo on marriages and house construction during a festival year.<sup>36</sup>

#### STAGES OF THE PILLAR FESTIVAL

##### *Selecting the Pillars* (onbashira mitate 見立て)

The Kamisha Pillar Festival is anchored at one end in the sacred shrine woods on Okoya Mountain, and at the other in the shrines in Kami Suwa and Chino City in the Suwa Basin. The stages of the festival symbolically traverse the distance between the timeless world of the *kami* in nature and the historical world of human society. The *matsuri* begins quietly on Okoya Mountain, led by a select few ritual specialists, and culminates in a noisy, joyous celebration in Kami Suwa attended by several hundred thousand participants and spectators. It begins, in the silence of winter, under the guidance

<sup>36</sup> I.e., during years when not only great amounts of money but the services of priests are likely to be in short supply. Today marriages do take place in a Pillar Festival Year (the most recent being the monkey year of 1992), but records at the Suwa City Hall reveal that the number of those marriages is about one fourth the number of marriages in an average year, and that the taboo is still observed during the months of March, April, May, October, and November, when townspeople are most busily engaged in festival affairs. (Miyasaka Mitsuaki, *Suwa Taisha*, p. 248.)

of the *yamazukuri*. Unlike the chief priest of the Suwa Shrine, who is an “outsider” appointed to the shrine by the Jinja Honchō, the *yamazukuri* are members of eight Chino City families who have tended the Kamisha woods since the Edo period.

The Kamisha *yamazukuri* select the trees to be used for the Kamisha pillars three years in advance of the festival. The fir trees are chosen for the appropriateness of their height, roundness, and general appearance. Each of the eight pillars must meet a different prescribed length and width requirement (approximately twenty meters long, ranging from one to three meters in diameter, and weighing between seven and thirteen tons).<sup>37</sup> The selection is confirmed twice. The first time, two years before the festival, *shimenawa* and wooden plaques indicating the shrine and the number of the pillar for which the tree is designated (e.g., Hon Miya Number One) are hung on the trees. At the time of the second confirmation, a year before the festival, the trees are marked by hammering *nagigama* 薙鎌 into their trunks. This flat bird-shaped piece of metal with notched edges is the emblem of the Suwa *kami* and shows that the tree is sacred. The spiritual force of its “demon crushing” power will protect the tree until it is felled. The *nagigama* combines in its shape both a suggestion of a scythe (a reminder of the *kami*’s role in agriculture) and a suggestion of a halberd (a reference to Takeminakata’s martial character). Through its homophonic name (*nagu* means both to mow or harvest with a scythe and to quell or quiet the wind) and its shape, and through the yin-yang symbolism in which metal controls wood, and wood controls wind, the *nagigama* also symbolizes the wind-quelling power of the Suwa *kami*.<sup>38</sup>

At the time of the selection (*mitate*), and throughout the various

<sup>37</sup> The number of available trees of adequate size in the Kamisha wood has declined to the point that in 1992 only the Number One pillar of the Hon Miya met the stipulated dimensions. Rather than use trees from the Higashi Mata National Forest for Kamisha rites, the festival managers decided to settle for smaller trees from the Kamisha wood on Okoya Mountain. (Correspondence with Mitsuaki Miyasaka, May, 1994.)

<sup>38</sup> Throughout Nagano, Niigata, Akita, and Yamanashi prefectures farm families in the fall, when the winds are strong, traditionally attached a scythe at the end of a pole, which they erected in the yard to cut (and control) the wind. (Such a pole, I am told, also exists at Zenkō-ji temple in Nagano City).

stages of the ritual, the high pitched wail of men and boy *ujiko* singing *kiyari* 木遣り (traditional work songs sung by woodcutters) contrasts with the solemnly intoned *norito* 祝詞 prayers of the priests. Ritual *onbe* wands held aloft by *ujiko* throughout the festival are yet another reminder of the way in which special ritual utensils and vocalizations associated with the Suwa region are local inflections on a national vocabulary of Shintō ritual objects (e.g., *shimenawa* and *gohei*) and utterances found throughout Japan.

At this stage the song is addressed to the *kami* of the mountain, requesting permission to take the tree and protection for the men who participate in the rite. Suggestive of the intimacy that the Japanese feel toward their local *kami* is the fact that the words of the *kiyari* (as opposed to the elaborate classical literary Japanese of the *norito* recited by the priests) are simple words with informal verb endings: e.g., *kamisama, onegai da*, “Oh *kami*, hear our humble request.”

At every stage of the festival, Shimosha rituals closely resemble but are different from those of the Kamisha. Unlike the Kamisha, there are no *yamazukuri* attached to the Shimosha. The selection of trees is made by *ujiko* two years before the festival. *Nagigama* are not used; *shimenawa* and wooden plaques alone identify the trees.

#### *The Rite of Drawing Lots* (chūsenshiki 抽籤式)

Whereas ritual specialists are used to select the trees for the Kamisha, a lottery is used to choose the *ujiko* to pull the Kamisha pillars down from Okoya Mountain. On February 15 of the Pillar Festival year, shrine elders from eighteen parishes assemble at the worship hall of the Hon Miya to draw the lots that will determine which pillars their parishes will pull. To ensure the drawing of a lucky lot (the Number One pillar of the Hon Miya is considered the most desirable), a series of preliminary lotteries is held before the lot-drawing ceremony to select the lot-drawers. Those who pass the rigors of the selection process enhance their luck further by praying at dawn at local *ubusuna* shrines and again before the Kamisha.<sup>39</sup> The atmosphere is electric at the final lot-drawing rite over which priests preside in a ceremony marked by a great display of gravity.

<sup>39</sup> These men also abstain from alcohol, meat, and sexual activity, take cold morning baths, etc., to prepare themselves for the lot-drawing ceremony.

Men dressed in their parish's distinctively colored *happi* 法被 crowd the shrine precinct and add to the tension by singing *kiyari*, hoisting *onbe* and banners, and chanting. When a lucky *ujiko* pulls the lot for the Hon Miya Number One pillar his elated companions toss him in the air and the courtyard rings with their shouts.

Once the pillar assignments have been determined, each parish begins to prepare for the festival. No one works alone. Some groups practice their parish's distinctive version of the *kiyari* in the shrines, in the forests, and along the river. Committees meet to discuss their tasks: the management of the levers, ropes, *onbe*, and banners that will be used in the festival. Children and adults meet to rehearse the dances and the drumming that will be performed to entertain the *kami*.

*Beating the Pulling Ropes* (hikitsuna-uchi 曳綱打ち)

From the last third of February through the first third of March special ropes for pulling the pillars are woven by *ujiko* selected by their parishes (approximately thirty men from each). Each parish is responsible for providing the hand-woven ropes it will use to do its share of the pulling. About 3,100 bundles of straw are beaten and twisted into 216 ropes of prescribed thickness and length, reinforced with wisteria vine.<sup>40</sup> The "main ropes" (*motozuna* 本綱), which will be passed through the holes ("eyes") drilled into the ends of the pillars, are about thirty centimeters thick and eighteen meters long. When the giant pillars are pulled, thinner ropes will be attached to the main ropes.

The ropes serve a symbolic as well as a practical function. Made of straw taken from thirty traditionally designated rice fields, they represent the communal energy that goes into bringing the pillars from the realm of *kami* to the world of human beings. Woven in community centers in the winter evenings and on weekends, the ropes that thousands of villagers will pull together also recall for late twentieth-century residents their common agrarian past when rope-making occupied farmers on many a long winter night. Today the

<sup>40</sup> In recent years manila flax ropes and synthetic ropes have also been used, and occasionally during the festival what appears to be a thick hand-made straw rope will upon closer inspection turn out to be a commercial rope covered with straw plaiting.

rope-making gives *ujiko*, who work at diverse occupations, an opportunity to come together again after seven years to renew old acquaintances and to get into the spirit of “*onbashira*.” *Kiyari* are sung, and the mood of anticipation builds. Everyone shares in the consciousness of the oncoming *matsuri*.

*Purifying the Sacred Axes and Saws in Fire* (hiire shiki 火入れ式)

In each stage of the *matsurigoto* (rituals to honor and celebrate the *kami*) ordinary objects and farm tools are turned into sacred ritual implements. On the first Saturday in March, after conducting purification rites at seven shrines of local tutelary *kami*, Kamisha priests proceed to the home of the head *yamazukuri* in Chino City, where a special forge is located. Here the elements of wood, fire, and metal are highlighted in a rite in which traditional cutting instruments are purified in a sanctified fire. A white cloth bearing the mulberry-leaf crest of the Kamisha is spread, and, following an announcement to the *kami*, the head *yamazukuri* creates sparks by pounding a piece of iron with a metal hammer on a metal plate, and feeds the sacred fire with cryptomeria tree needles, box tree wood, and charcoal made from pine. As shrine elders look on, the priests purify saws and axes, including a ceremonial axe with a red-lacquered handle passed down from the Edo period.

In the case of the Shimosha, the trees are felled a year before the festival. The *hiire shiki* of the Shimosha is performed on the day of the cutting at a shrine located near the foot of the mountain in the Higashi Mata National Forest from which the eight pillars will be taken.

*The Rite of Felling the Trees* (bassai shiki 伐採式)

Snow lies deep on the ground on the first Sunday in March when Kamisha *yamazukuri*, shrine elders in charge of each of the eight pillars, and priests gather before the small shrine on the lower slope of Okoya Mountain.<sup>41</sup> The axes and saws are laid before the shrine

<sup>41</sup> Nowadays the men go from the town to the mountain part way by car, and begin cutting the trees about 8 a.m. In the Edo period, parishioners used packhorses and went up the mountain by torchlight in the evening immediately after the axe purification rite, arrived about 2 a.m., slept on the mountain, and began cutting the trees before dawn. By all accounts the scene of hundreds of torchlights snaking up the mountain side in the night was very striking and added much to the awesomeness of the rite. Miyasaka Mitsuaki, *Suwa Taisha*, p. 184.

and the chief priest prays to the mountain *kami*. The elders of the eighteen parishes conduct a lottery to determine who will assist in the cutting of which tree. There are twenty to thirty shrine elders from each parish, and together with the other men who accompany them, the party numbers several hundred men. The priests offer more *norito* prayers, and purification rites are conducted. The distinction between purified space and non-purified space constitutes an important invisible boundary that will be marked with rituals throughout the *matsuri*, which cannot proceed unless the priests continuously define a boundary between the sacred play sphere (in which the *kami* resides), and the undifferentiated profane sphere outside the ritual space.

When the party reaches the site where the trees will be cut, an *ujiko* sings a *kiyari* announcing the identity of the party to the mountain *kami* and requesting permission to take the trees. A rite is performed at each tree before it is cut, beginning with the tree designated to be the Hon Miya Number One pillar. Every step of the cutting is done according to a prescribed rite. *Yamazukuri* strike the tree with their axes three times and use the saw three times. More rites are performed and the tree is felled by teams of *ujiko* under the direction of the *yamazukuri*, blessed, and cut according to prescribed size.

Following the noon break, during which the men drink “divine sake” (*omiki* お酒), there is another purification rite when the branches and bark are stripped from the tree, leaving the “god tree” shining brightly in the green mountain forest. Although *ujiko* carried them in the past, today the denuded trees are transported with machinery by professional operators to the spot called the “pillar resting place” (*onbashira okiba* 置き場), where they will rest for a month. The area is marked by *shimenawa* to assure the *kami* of the purity of this place where it can rest without being affected by pollution.

A month later, the day before the trees will be pulled out of the mountain, holes are bored into the ends of the pillars so that ropes and guide bars can be passed through them. These holes are called “loach mouths” (*medoguchi* メドグチ) as their appearance resembles the pursed mouths of loach fish. The reference to fish, which evokes the lake and rivers at the foot of the mountain, and the designation of “male” and “female” ropes (secured with “male” and

“female” knots) are some of the ways in which ritual names create a sense of complementarity and balance, and through the harmony of opposites, a sense of unity.

The ritual calendar is similarly governed by a principle of complementarity and balance. Events take place during tiger and monkey years and days, which lie diametrically opposite each other on the twelve-unit sexagenary calendar. When the festival is held during the year of the tiger, the Kamisha *yamadashi* (see the following) begins on the first tiger day in April, but the Shimosha *yamadashi* begins on the first monkey day following the seventh day of the month. The Kamisha *satobiki* 里曳き or “pulling through the village” phase begins on the first tiger day in May, but the Shimosha *satobiki* begins on the first monkey day following the seventh. In monkey years the reverse order is observed, with Kamisha *yamadashi* beginning on the first monkey day, and the Shimosha *yamadashi* and *satobiki* beginning on the first tiger day after the seventh day of April and May.

*Pulling the Pillars out of the Mountains* (yamadashi 山出し)

The pillars for the Kamisha are dragged down from Okoya Mountain during the first ten days of April. Heavy “main ropes” are slipped through the “loach mouth” holes and “male” and “female” guide ropes are attached to the main ropes.

The pulling is preceded by a purification rite consisting of salt-tossing and a prayer for the safety of the participants. For the *ujiko*, the *yamadashi* and the stages that follow are an occasion for displaying manliness through stylized movements and shouts and acts of physical daring. With a single *kiyari* cry, the men take up the ropes and the pulling begins. The *kiyari* sets the pace of the pulling and is answered in turn by a chorus of chanting by the *ujiko*. In addition to ropes, the Kamisha pillars are each outfitted with four huge jutting beams, two at the head and two at the back end. Inserted into the loach mouth holes, they are called “loach levers” (*medoteko* ヌド挺) and are used to provide leverage to more effectively guide the heavy pillars. Young men stand on ropes slung over the loach levers (about ten men on each, that is, forty men on each pillar), which are bound in festive red-and-white cloth, and by rocking back and forth on their perches, help to nudge the pillar along. The

youths standing on the loach levers and on the heavy main ropes wave *onbe*, which replicate the form of the pillars and provide the *kami* with an additional means of transportation, and move their arms rhythmically in time to energizing cries of “*wasshoi, wasshoi.*” Their arm movements mimic the motions of pushing; the stylization of movement discernible already at this stage will become more pronounced as the pillars move closer to the shrines. The movement of the pillars is also facilitated by the actions of the *tekobō-shū* 梶子棒衆, squads of young men who walk alongside the pillars and maneuver them with lever sticks (*tekobō*). They are dressed in woodcutter work clothes: turtleneck jerseys under black jumper tops, tight-fitting work pants and leggings, which are now worn to signify that they belong to a group dedicated to celebrating the *kami*. As the pillars are pulled along a nine mile route called the “pillar highway” (*onbashira kaidō* 御柱街道), bugles sounding a spirited signal to charge (*shingunkyoku* 進軍曲), commonly heard today at baseball games, further invigorate the *kiyari* and the rhythmic cries of “*wasshoi, wasshoi.*”

*Dropping the kamisha pillars* (Kamisha ki-otoshi 木落し). On the night of the first day of the *yamadashi* the pillars are allowed to rest at a shrine along the way. Shortly after leaving the shrine the next day, the pillars come to the steep *ki-otoshi* (“dropping the tree”) slope. The noise level rises as the crowd prepares for the next move. The pillars are slid down the slope, with men standing on the loach levers and on the main ropes. Bodies are flung left and right as the giant pillars tilt and slide. Two days are devoted to the event and the sound of *banzai*, *kiyari*, cheers, whistling, and bugling fill the cold early spring air to produce an out-of-the-ordinary experience for participants and as many as 10,000 spectators.

*Crossing the river* (kawagoshi 川越し) or *washing the deity* (*kami arai* 神洗い). After they are “dropped” down the *ki-otoshi* slope, the pillars are drawn over a narrow bridge, which requires that the protruding loach levers be temporarily removed. The pillars are then dragged down the Chino City highway and across rice paddies to the frigid Miyagawa River (“Shrine River”), fed by snow runoff from the Yatsugatake Range. In a show of bravado men leap into the river



and pass the pulling ropes to the men waiting on the opposite bank. The pillars, with their loach levers back on, are then drawn into the river for a “purifying” bath. Those riding on the loach levers are thrown into the icy water. Some men attempt to hang onto the ropes that are extended across the river to the opposite bank, but within a few minutes the writhing bodies drop from the heavy ropes into the stream. The long heavy pillars are manipulated across the river and moved to the opposite bank, where men waiting to receive them join in the *kiyari* and pull with all their might to maneuver the pillars onto the bank. The strange dragon-horn-like loach levers come into view and finally the pillars themselves are hauled up by hundreds of helping hands.

*Dropping the shimosha pillars* (Shimosha *ki-otoshi*). The drama of the *yamadashi* reaches a high point with the Shimosha *ki-otoshi*. The 100 meter high, 45 degree Shimosha *ki-otoshi* slope is considerably longer and steeper than that of the Kamisha. Publicity surrounding the Shimosha *ki-otoshi* has grown over the years as it has become more violent, and the media attention in turn has encouraged its participants to display an even more daring recklessness. In a film made of the 1932 *ki-otoshi*, for example, *ujiko* gently roll the pillars down the slope sideways. Since then, the event has become more dangerous as men have taken to riding the pillars down the slope head first. The sight of a dozen to twenty men seated on a giant log careening down a steep slope recalls the excitement of a wild bull run. In spite of the recklessness of the act, the rite is carefully orchestrated. The pillars descend the slope in a prescribed order, four each day, at one hour intervals, and the hour of each pillar’s *ki-otoshi* is widely advertised in local papers. There is much display prior to each of the runs. Men stand on the pillar, poised precariously on the lip of the cliff, and take turns moving to its front end to lead the *kiyari*. The man who sits at the front when the pillar descends is called the “first rider” (*hananori* 端乗り). It is a highly coveted role, and at times fisticuffs occur in the final moments before the descent as riders compete for this prime position. As the pillar nears the bottom of the slope, crowds of men rush forth to leap on the hurtling missile. Injuries are frequent, and on occasion, even fatal. A rider may be pinned under the log, but most of the injuries occur in the

melee of punching, hitting, and kicking as men compete for a place on the moving log. Ambulances waiting in the background give the event an extra edge. But when a serious injury, or death, occurs, there is little to-do. The life of the rider, they say, was taken by the *kami*.

*Dressing the pillars* (shimenawakake 注連掛け). Following the *ki-otoshi* the Kamisha pillars are taken down the old Nakasendō highway two kilometers to the site of the *shimekake* (lit: “putting on the *shimenawa*”), where they are decorated with the straw ropes festooned with white paper strips. Facing Mikoya Mountain in the East, the *ujiko* sing a *kiyari* to send the *kami* back to the mountain (*yama no kamigaeshi no kiyari*).

The pillars will rest at this site, called the “pillar estate” (*on-bashira yashiki* 屋敷) for a month. To assure the maintenance of ritual purity, bamboo poles are erected to form an enclosure for the pillars, and the priests perform a purification rite to protect the pillars in the absence of the mountain *kami*.

Shimosha pillars are protected by a fence of *shimenawa* hung from white-birch branches while they wait to be pulled into Shimo Suwa.

*Retiring the Old Pillars* (furuonbashira yasume 古御柱休め)

Once the *yamadashi* is completed, the old pillars which have stood in the shrine courtyard since the previous festival are toppled and removed. At the Kamisha this task has been performed by the residents of Nakashima Village since the Edo period. The old Kamisha pillars are sold to be used in the construction of station platforms and golf driving ranges. The old Shimosha pillars are removed by local businessmen and shrine attendants to be made into amulets, as well as material for building and repairs.

*Pulling the Pillars through the Town* (satobiki 里曳き)

To prepare the pillars for their town debut, *ujiko* put on new pulling ropes, replace the dirty loach levers, and prettify the pillars.

Priests, *yamazukuri*, shrine elders, the foreman of the shrine carpenters, and men whose hereditary role is to wind ropes around the pillars when they are erected (*tsunamaki* 綱巻き) walk at the head of a solemn procession in which a boat—a palanquin for the *kami* made

of small tree branches bent into a hull and covered with a purple cloth—is born by *ujiko* through the town. Straws mats are spread inside the boat and a curtain bearing the shrine's mulberry-leaf crest is hung outside. A *nagigama* (symbol of the authority of the Suwa *kami*) and a bell (a traditional shamanistic implement) are attached to a ritual wand set up in the middle.<sup>42</sup>

The entourage starts from the Hon Miya shrine precinct and proceeds in the direction of the oncoming pillars. Though they are but ordinary citizens on other days, the *yamazukuri* and *tsunamaki* now take on an extraordinary aura dressed in the stiff white angular robes of Shintō priests. These ritual specialists leading the procession represent and affirm ritual hierarchy.

The solemnity of their procession contrasts with the noisy festive atmosphere of the people's parades that follow. For two days throngs of townspeople and visitors, particularly from prefectures where Suwa Shrines are numerous, parade through town to welcome the oncoming pillars. Local industries and businesses shut down, and, rain or shine, the *satobiki* takes place according to a tightly defined schedule, for it is believed that failure to properly entertain the *kami* and to erect its pillars in the shrine courtyards on time may bring down its wrath on the community.

Space ordinarily given over to business and commerce is transformed into a special space wherein the transformative power of *matsuri* will work its magic. Popular theater comes to the fore in all its diversity of color, shape, sound, and rhythm in the *satobiki*. Gender roles are crossed as young men dress in women's clothing; social propriety is thrown overboard as youths prance about half-naked and display enormous artificial phalluses strapped to their waists. Social hierarchies are ignored as marginal groups of people join in, and through their rambunctious and sometimes violent outbursts add to the atmosphere of license. Historical time is reversed, as celebrants dress up in feudal costumes and assume the identities of

<sup>42</sup> Perhaps to scare away the devils. A.W. Sadler (in "Carrying the *Mikoshi*," *Asian Folklore Studies* 31.1 (1972), p. 110) reports on an interview that he had with a shrine priest during a festival. According to the priest festival time is a critical time when the *kami* are among the people, but the devils are also abroad. The streets down which the *mikoshi* ("kami palanquin") will travel is full of devils, so the way is prepared for the *mikoshi* by making sounds: pounding the drum and jangling the priest's staff.

Edo period jugglers, entertainers, and samurai. A young local child, dressed like the medieval *ohōri* and escorted on horseback through the town by child attendants dressed like samurai retainers, recalls the medieval era when the *ohōri* was in fact a child and led the Pillar Festival parade.<sup>43</sup> A horsemen's parade (*kiba gyōretsu* 騎馬行列) that moves to the edge of town in a symbolic gesture to greet the pillars reiterates the theme of travel and suggests the age of the daimyō processions.<sup>44</sup> The days of daimyō processions are also mirrored in the *nagamochi* parade: members of young men's associations carrying heavy wooden chests (*nagamochi* 長持ち) suspended from *hinoki* (Japanese cypress) pillars, who move slowly through the town executing rhythmic dance-like steps to the *nagamochi* song.<sup>45</sup> As they bear on their shoulders the weight of the six-meter-long stripped pillars, they swing their staves and sway in a manner that causes the chests, cushioned with oil-soaked cloths, to produce peculiar squeaking sounds. Their stylized steps, which suggest knees buckling under the heavy weight of the chests, show off the magnificence of the *hinoki* pillars and herald the grandeur of the giant fir pillars yet to come.

<sup>43</sup> I.e., much as the early Japanese emperors were children when they were enthroned. For an interesting discussion of the child as a vehicle for the *kami* see Sadler, p. 113. Sadler quotes Taka Yamada's account of the child who rides on horseback at the head of certain shrine processions: "The child is called *hitotsu mono* (一つもの), literally, "one thing," which indicates that he is unique and has no substitute. A boy chosen for this position purifies himself for seven days prior to the festival. Then on the day of the festival a priest repeats magic formulas and puts make-up on him. Suddenly the child falls into ecstasy, in which state he remains until the festival is over and the make-up is washed off." The boy took the place of the *mikoshi*. It was said that the "divine spirit" (*shinrei*) possessed him.

<sup>44</sup> In the days of alternate attendance (*sankin kōtai*) at the shogunal palace in Edo, the mounted horsemen's parade (*kiba gyōretsu*) led by the *ohōri* (who was a member of the Suwa clan and was taken to be a "living *kami*" descended from Takeminakata), escorted the pillars through the town. There were then many riders, "more than one could count" (i.e., over 300). This practice was discontinued in 1872, the year after the feudal system was dismantled. Today, the function of the "*kiba gyōretsu*" is purely decorative. Members of culture preservation societies (*hōzonkai*) organize a simple mounted horsemen's parade, which does not lead the pillars into the town, but instead goes to meet them. (Miyasaka Mitsuaki, *Suwa Taisha*, pp. 237–41.)

<sup>45</sup> In earlier times, when the *nagamochi* bearers went up the mountain to meet the pillars, the *nagamochi* boxes (smaller than those used today) contained food, clothing, and levers for the use of the men pulling the trees down from the mountains. (In the *sankin kōtai* of the Tokugawa period *nagamochi* were used to transport the daimyō's belongings on the journey to and from Edo). Today, the *nagamochi* parade takes place only in town and its function is more for entertainment than anything else. (Miyasaka Mitsuaki, *Suwa Taisha*, pp. 243–44.)

There are great quantities of “divine sake,” much of it freely distributed to passersby by various community organizations. People troop in and out of houses and shops lining the street, where festival dishes are offered to festival-goers. The familiar red-and-white awnings of the *tekiya* 的屋 (itinerant vendor) stalls mark the spots where octopus dumplings, vegetable pancakes, cotton candy, bean jam buns, plastic masks, and a variety of other cheap sweets and toys can be purchased. Celebrants make their way up and down the street filling themselves with food, drink, and the sights and sounds of *matsuri*.

The pillars are pulled through the town on the last two days of the *satobiki*. Some shopkeepers as well as the owners of larger companies open their buildings to enable spectators to climb to the top floors for a better view of the pillars, which are practically buried by the thousands of people who pull them, prod them with levers, and stand on them as they snake their way through the streets. The pillars pass along a prescribed route in a pre-determined order, announced in the local papers ahead of time; their identities are moreover signified by the color of the *happi* of the parishioners assigned to pull them. The repeated calls of “*wasshoi, wasshoi,*” *kiyari* singing, and bugle music signal their approach. As a pillar draws nigh, banners and *onbe* waving in the air come into view first, followed by the bright colors of the *happi* of the *ujiko* pulling and the turtle-neck jerseys of the *tekobō-shū* pushing the pillars with their levers. *Tekobō-shū* stand triumphantly on the slowly moving pillars, and as they chant, bend their arms rhythmically at the elbows in a movement that imitates a pushing motion, as if to help the work along. The pillars stop frequently, and spectators run to stand on them and have their photographs taken, or try their hand at pulling, attaching a small rope to one of the numerous ropes that have been hung around the pillar to facilitate maximum participation.

The theme of transport and travel, evoked by the daimyō procession, the horsemen’s parade, and the parade of the brushwood boat-float, is further dramatized by a procession of *ujiko* who lead a horse to a bridge by the Hon Miya. There the horse, a symbolic mount for a *kami*, is ceremoniously presented to the chief priest.

The Shimo Suwa *satobiki* parade takes place a week after the Kami Suwa parade, and schools, plants, and businesses close for

the occasion. The Haru Miya Number One pillar leads the procession of pillars, with the Aki Miya Number Four pillar bringing up the rear. Again, a procession of shrine elders and priests goes forth from the Aki Miya to greet the pillars, stopping at the Haru Miya for special rites along the way. Two days of festive parades by costumed townspeople precede the parade of the pillars. It takes two more days to move the pillars from the *shimekake* site to the Haru Miya precinct. The last pillar enters the Aki Miya precinct according to schedule, at 6 p.m. on the last day of the *satobiki*.<sup>46</sup>

*The Rite of Erecting the Pillars* (tateonbashira-sai 建て御柱祭)

The celebration of life and renewal is epitomized in the erection of new pillars in the spaces vacated by old pillars. After spending months in a horizontal position on the ground, leaving huge snaking trails in the dust, the spectral trees, uprooted, delimbed, and debarked, will be beheaded and erected in an elaborate ritual consisting of many prescribed techniques and requiring the ministrations of many ritual specialists.

*Cutting the crown of the pillar* (onbashira kan-otoshi 冠落し). The Hon Miya pillars arrive in the evening, by which time the Mae Miya pillars have been moved to their designated spots, and are laid alongside the holes vacated by the pillars from the previous seven years. Sacred axes and saws are carefully lined up at the head of the pillars and prayers are recited by the shrine priests while the shrine elders, *yamazukuri*, *tsunamaki*, and other officials stand reverently with bowed heads. One by one the pillars are purified with paper amulets (*taima* 大麻) and salt. Using a sacred axe, the head of the shrine carpenter cuts the top of the pillar three times and is then joined by others who assist him in whittling the top into a three-cornered shape. (According to tradition, Suwa Taisha pillars are whittled into three-cornered shapes but pillars of other Suwa shrines are whittled into four-cornered shapes.) Wood chips from the sacred tree are thrown to spectators, who scramble for them eagerly. The chip

<sup>46</sup> The Shimosha pillars turn off the highway and descend a slope (a second *ki-otoshi* slope) to enter the Shimosha Haru Miya shrine precinct from the back of the shrine. Haru Miya pillars are erected that same day and Aki Miya pillars are taken on to the Aki Miya shrine to be erected the following day.

amulets are regarded as parts of the *shintai* of the *kami*, and as such, are endowed with protective power for warding off accidents and bringing prosperity.

Parishioners from Nakashima Village clean out the hole in which the pillar will be fitted, and members of the Kobayashi clan, who have performed the role of *tsunamaki* “rope winders” since the Edo period, take hold of the ropes attached to the top of the pillar and proceed to wind them about the pillar, in patterns of seven, five, and three windings, in rhythm to a special chant, and pull the ropes in four directions to balance and stabilize the pillar as it is erected in the hole.

A youth selected at the beginning of the festival sits atop the pillar with a ritual wand in his hand as the pillar is erected. He passes the *gohei* over its top for the last time, then sticks it into it. A loud *banzai* goes up from the crowd. A final *kiyari* is sung to send the *kami* back to the mountain one last time, and the youth slips to the earth, sliding down one of the ropes used to hoist and stabilize the pillar.

Shimosha pillars slowly inch their way to the Haru Miya and Aki Miya precincts following a prescribed route, in a prescribed order. The last pillar to be erected, by midnight, is the Aki Miya Number Four. The *tateonbashira* rite proceeds as at the Kamisha, but as the Shimosha pillars are to be *yorishiro* and not *kami*, instead of affixing a *gohei* the youth on top of the pillar at the end of the ceremony simply waves a purifying *sakaki* 榊 branch over the top of the pillar.

*Packing the earth around the foot of the pillar* (onbashira nekatame 根固 ぬ). The day following the *tateonbashira* celebrants gather as officials from Nakashima Village use a giant sixty kilogram mallet to pound the staves set up at the base of the pillar to hold it in place. Each official pounds each staff three times. A prayer is recited to implore the pillar “to remain as it is, to become a majestic pillar, without rotting, without moving, without leaning.” Following the ceremony a *himorogi* fence is set up around each pillar. Another ceremony, called the “great festival of the ceremonial year of the sacred pillar” (*shikinen onbashira taisai* 式年御柱大祭), held in the morning before the Treasure Hall, concludes the festival.

At the corresponding ceremony at the Shimosha, a giant mallet is wielded by a single *ujiko*, and the concluding rites are conducted in the afternoon.

*The Rite of Transferring the Kami* (sengū-sai 遷宮祭)

In mid-June, the *kami* residing in the Kamisha is transferred from the Treasure Hall east of the Hon Miya to an identical newly constructed Treasure Hall west of the building. The old hall will be torn down and rebuilt in time to receive the *kami* at the end of the next six-year cycle. In the *sengū-sai* the sacred jewel, representing the *kami*, is carried by priests in a sacred palanquin, covered with brocaded cloth. The cloths are never removed, and a new one is laid upon the old ones every seven years, resulting in a considerable layering of old moth-eaten cloths.<sup>47</sup> In carrying the sacred palanquin the priests walk over a white cloth, donated by parishioners, laid on the ground between the two Treasure Halls. This cloth is said to have the power to protect one against illness if made into clothing after the ritual.

In a reversal of time order, the *sengū-sai* of the Shimosha is conducted not after the pillars are brought to town, as at the Kamisha, but before, and not during the day, but at night, before the *satobiki*. All lights, save that of a bonfire burning in the garden, are extinguished during the rite.

*The Little Shrine Festivals* (komiya matsuri 小宮祭り)

The mirroring of the Kamisha festival does not stop with the virtually identical festival conducted at the Shimosha. From September to December small duplicate pillar festivals are conducted at small neighborhood shrines in both Kami Suwa and Shimo Suwa to honor local *kami* of springs, streams, mountains, and hills. Tree trunks pulled down from the same “tree cutting” sites whence the larger pillars were drawn are pulled through the local neighborhoods by *ujiko* and erected in the precincts of small neighborhood shrines. Occasionally the pillars erected are the cut-off tops of trees that were used for the large pillars. Unlike the Kamisha and Shimosha pillars, however, these pillars do not stand for seven years, but are removed shortly after their erection.

<sup>47</sup> The *shintai* of Amaterasu (and other *kami*) is also wrapped in layers of cloth. Alan Miller in “The Garments of the Gods in Japanese Ritual,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 5.2 (Summer 1991) discusses the cloth used to wrap the mirror that symbolizes her presence and suggests that their function may be to at once hide/withhold and reveal/expose the presence and the power of the *kami* (revealing the invisible through the visible cloth).



## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE SUWA PILLAR FESTIVAL

Before the *urusato zukuri* ふるさとづくり (“old village making”) movement of the 1970s led to a conscious attempt on the part of local governments and local and national media to create a sense of nostalgia for the rural village past, the Suwa Pillar Festival, like many other local festivals, was not well known in Japan as a whole.

Although it is believed to date back at least to the late Heian period, it was not until the Kamakura period (1185–1333) that written references to the Pillar Festival appeared. The *Ōmiya zōei mokuroku* 大宮造營目録 (“Record of the Construction of Large Shrines,” 1329) tells of money being collected throughout Shinano province, mainly by selling amulets, and used for reconstructing the Treasure Halls and pulling down old pillars and setting up new ones.<sup>48</sup> There are also references to a procession of mounted warriors, led by the *ohōri*, to greet the pillars.<sup>49</sup> The festival took on a popular air during the Edo period, when it was described in *Shinano kuni mukashi sugata* 信濃国昔姿 (“Old Customs of Shinano Province,” 1819) as a very lively affair featuring a horse parade and hundreds of *ujiko* clinging to ropes “like leaf hoppers.”<sup>50</sup> Popular support of the shrine was not necessarily voluntary, however. According to the *Suwa Kamisha onbashira satobiki hikinin soku-chō* 諏訪上社御柱里曳き曳き人足帳 (“Register of Pullers in the Suwa Kamisha Onbashira Satobiki,” 1812), participation in the rope-beating and pillar-erecting was done at the behest of the Takashima daimyō, and each village in Suwa was assigned a role to play.<sup>51</sup>

At the time of the Meiji restoration, the breakdown of the rigid feudal system led to increased competition on all levels of life in Japan, and social conditions were unsettled. The Pillar Festival was delayed in 1868, and when it was finally held that winter, it was on a considerably reduced scale. The festival was not held in 1874, a transitional time soon after the fiefs were dismantled and local prefectural governments were set up. It was revived in 1890. That year for the first time a lottery was held at the Kamisha to determine assign-

<sup>48</sup> Suwa Shi Hakubutsukan, *Onbashira to tomo ni*, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

ments for pulling the pillars, and detailed regulations governing the procedures to be followed were issued. These measures were intended to help maintain social order at a time when local communities were keenly engaged in acrimonious quarrels with each other. These quarrels were so intense that for a while during the Meiji period, the Pillar Festival was known as a “fighting festival” (*kenka matsuri*). Villages competed furiously for primacy of place especially during the *yamadashi* and *satobiki*. In 1902 a fight involving several hundred persons broke out between the team pulling the Hon Miya Number Two pillar and the Mae Miya Number Two pillar. Two people were killed and many others were injured. Another fight erupted in 1908 when members of the Komezawa Village team pulling the “female rope” quarreled with the Kitayama Village team pulling the “male rope” of the Hon Miya Number Four pillar over how to handle the levers. Some men came prepared for trouble, storing rocks and extra *tekobō* sticks in the *nagamochi* boxes, and before the day was over the quarrel escalated to a major rock battle. As a result, in the 1914 festival it was decided to spend two days instead of one to pull the pillars through the towns, and to extend the spaces separating the pillars from two blocks to five. Pillar pulling assignments were given to the communities in advance to prevent squabbling during the festival. In 1926 the number of *tekobō* sticks allowed to each village was limited, and the names of the villages were written on them to encourage a greater sense of responsibility. From the beginning of the Meiji period most of the participants were firemen who identified the units they belonged to by wearing their firemen uniforms; in 1914 the mayor of Suwa limited the number of firemen who could participate and ordered the same new uniforms for everyone to discourage partisan fighting.

By the Taishō period local regional customs had become better known among city dwellers as a result of improved transportation and communications. Suwa had become a favorite watering spot for Tokyo literati, attracting well-known writers, including Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and members of the Shirakaba coterie. In 1920 the festival was the setting of a comic play written by Arishima Takeo with the assistance of his half-brother Satomi Ton and Fujimori Narikichi 藤森成吉. Based on the story of Tachikawa Tomoshirō 立川知四郎, a late Edo period architect, sculptor, and author born in

Suwa, *Onbashira* was performed at the Tokyo Shintomi-za theater and, in spite of complaints about the excessive use of dialect, which made it difficult to follow, was generally well-received by critics (including Nagai Kafū, who reviewed it in the magazine *Shin'engei* 新演芸).

Three years later the novelist Uno Kōji 宇野浩二 (1891–1961) published a novel, *Yamagoi* 山恋 (Love of Mountains), in which he describes the *satobiki* portion of the festival. For the main character of the novel, who is in love with a Shimo Suwa geisha, the significance of the festival lies in the way in which it sections off a lifetime into seven-year segments. Townspeople are born, grow up, marry and bear children, and die in the seven-year intervals between pillar festivals. Young men, who could not imagine seven years ago that they would still be stuck in Shimo Suwa, reflect ruefully upon their dashed dreams. Oldtimers wonder if they will be around to see another festival. The festival figures predominantly in the lives of the country folk, who are brought together to rehearse the *kiyari* and the *nagamochi* parade. Country folk come from miles around, decked out in their festival clothes and carrying their festival foods. The protagonist watches it all with a bemused eye, from his inn window, through his binoculars, and wishes that he were the Wind God so that he might blow away the hateful figure of the child daimyō riding through the town on horseback, clothed in layers of brocaded kimonos provided by his father, the rich silk manufacturer who is the protagonist's rival in love.

In the early 1930s, when interest was focused upon local histories and customs, in part in reaction against the Europeanization of culture during the Meiji and Taishō periods, a documentary film was made of the Pillar Festival that suggests a festival of a distinctly different mood from that of the present.<sup>52</sup> In the 1932 film (as well as in photographs taken during the Meiji and Taishō periods) hundreds of people are shown moving up the mountain paths in an endless snaking procession to meet the pillars. The atmosphere of the *yamadashi* conveyed by the background music is light-hearted. Women in kimono carry parasols and walk alongside the pillars as they are pulled down the mountain path. The pillars are rolled gent-

<sup>52</sup> Segments of this film, which is the property of the Suwa City Museum, are shown in the 1992 NHK production *Suwa onbashira matsuri: kodai kara no messēji*.

ly sideways down the *ki-otoshi* slope; men do not ride the pillars rodeo-style headfirst down the slope as they do today. These were, after all, sacred trees, and in 1932 they were still treated as such.

The Suwa Shrine and the Pillar Festival appear to have played an important role locally during the years of the Greater East Asia War, when matters concerning preparations for the festival, the methods of pulling the pillars, and the routes along which they were to be pulled were spelled out in great detail by a committee of firemen, policemen, and *ujiko*. In a group photo taken in 1938 the Japanese war flag is held in the middle of a group of men wearing head bands and colorful garb (a far greater array of patterns and colors than the festival clothing worn today), and holding their *tekobō* sticks conspicuously before them.<sup>53</sup> The 1944 festival, however, was smaller and more subdued, and the pillars erected that year were greatly reduced in size, for by then most of the adult men had been conscripted and school boys from the sixth grade and up were recruited to take their places in the *yamadashi* and *satobiki*. Provisions were scarce, and refreshments were not served, so that the extra food might be sent to the front. In addition to banners inscribed with the words “Japan’s Number One War God” (*Nippon dai-ichi ōikusa-kami* 日本第一大軍神), banners inscribed with prayers for victory were placed about the shrines, including the Misayama Shrine on Okoya Mountain. Amulets from the pillars distributed at the *kan-otoshi* rite were taken to the front in red-and-white woven amulet bags to help raise soldiers’ spirits.

In 1950, the size of the pillars was increased, in an attempt to persuade the *kami* to bestow special favors in difficult times, and the details of the festival were even more closely prescribed. Women, freed from taboos that had prevented them from setting foot on sacred mountains and participating in festivals before the war, were permitted to join in pulling the pillars for the first time. Responding to a questionnaire passed out in 1950, respondents favored continuing the Pillar Festival but expressed concern about the excessive cost, time, and labor involved and about the damage to rice paddies and dry fields caused by dragging giant pillars over them—reservations perhaps rooted, at least in part, in the failure of the war god to

<sup>53</sup> Suwa Shi Hakubutsukan, *Onbashira to tomo ni*, p. 31.

achieve the victory that many residents were convinced would come, in spite of the hardships.<sup>54</sup>

Judging from a black-and-white documentary film of the festival made by NHK in 1962, seventeen years into the post-war period the festival had already begun to reflect a more prosperous economy and to acquire some of the more exuberant, sporting overtones that it displays today.<sup>55</sup> A few men are seen sitting on the pillar as it makes its descent in the *ki-otoshi*, now no longer rolling sideways down the slope but moving base-of-the-trunk first. Dramatic orchestral music from the opera *Sylvia* by Delibes establishes a heroic romantic mood for the pillar-pulling and pillar-riding that year.<sup>56</sup>

With the exception of Miyasaka Kiyomichi's book *Suwa no onbashira-sai* (The Suwa Pillar Festival), which appeared in 1958, publications on the festival did not appear in significant numbers until the late 1980s and early 1990s. These publications coincide with the notably increased degree of prosperity of the Suwa region, due partly to the role in international trade played by high-tech Suwa companies. At the same time, videos and television programs about the Suwa Pillar Festival, made by both local television stations and by major national communications corporations, such as Iwanami Publishing Corporation and the national broadcasting network (NHK), have attracted national attention to the festival.

Theories concerning the meaning of the pillars have been summarized by the two principal researchers of the Pillar Festival, Miyasaka Kiyomichi and Miyasaka Mitsuaki.<sup>57</sup> These can be grouped into six general categories as follows:

I. The pillars are set up to demarcate a pure place and to attract the *kami*, in a manner similar to the way in which carp banners or flag poles are used to attract the attention of the *kami*. Some say that the pillars serve to bring the *kami* of the mountains and the forests into the community. This view holds that the pillars function as a *yorishiro* or media of travel, and that without them, the *kami* will not come to Suwa.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>55</sup> Shown in *Suwa onbashira matsuri: kodai kara no messēji*.

<sup>56</sup> Identified as such by Brian Priestman, director of the University of Kansas Orchestra.

<sup>57</sup> Miyasaka Kiyomichi, pp. 29–58, and Miyasaka Mitsuaki, *Suwa Taisha*, pp. 251–57.

A closely related view is that the pillars are *shintai*, objects in which the *kami* resides, and are worshiped as *kami*. The idea that the pillars become *kami* when they are erected is supported by the lyrics of the *kiyari* sung by the festival participants and was the explanation readily offered by participants whom I interviewed in 1992.

II. Another group of theories sees the pillars as marking the territory of the *kami*. According to these explanations: a) The pillars serve as a warning, marking a taboo area belonging to Takeminakata, where ordinary people are not allowed to set foot. The pillars are thus functionally analogous to bamboo pillars that remain on sacred land after the *shimenawa* preventing entrance have been taken down. b) The pillars were intended to ward off attack by hostile tribes by showing that a *kami* protected the area. c) The pillars mark a place of refuge for the defeated god. d) Origuchi Shinobu 折口信夫, for example, explains the presence of the pillars as a means to demarcate land that has been chosen by the *kami* and to suppress and pacify restless earth spirits. e) A related interpretation holds that the pillars designate the sacred ground of the original earth deity. At the Kamisha, this earth *kami* is believed to rest within Moriya Mountain itself and within the “inkstone rock” (*suzuri-ishi* 硯石) located at the base of the mountain. At the Shimosha a cryptomeria in the Haru Miya precinct and a yew tree in the Aki Miya precinct are taken to be the places where the *kami* lodges.

III. Another set of theories holds that the pillars were originally erected to control the wind and rain. This explanation coincides with the finding of poles with scythes attached to their tops used by Japanese farmers in Nagano, Niigata, and Akita prefectures to quell the wind. In Oshino Village in Yamanashi prefecture a pole with a scythe attached to the end is erected to make the “wind god” avoid the village. (Similar kinds of wind poles are said to exist among Ural Altaic tribes of northeast Asia.)

IV. There are also theories that consider the pillars to be gifts given to Takeminakata by *ujiko*. A related view holds that they are set up as a sign to the *kami* that a building has been erected for it; the reasoning behind this is that since the *kami* is invisible, the building provided for the *kami* need not have a physical form. Yet another view finds the enormous size of the pillars to be a way of extolling

the authority of Takeminakata. Firs are cut because they are lighter than the surrounding hemlock, cypress, and Chinese pine, and not of much use for building.

V. Explanations of a numerological nature emphasize the symbolism of the four pillars and seek a correspondence between the four pillars in each shrine precinct and the four directions. Dating back to the medieval period when Buddhism and Shintō were practiced as practically one and the same religion in the synthesis known as Ryōbu Shintō, and Buddhist temples were located within the Suwa shrine precincts, the pillars are also said to represent, variously, the four Bodhisattva “hearts”: compassion (*ji* 慈); sorrow (*hi* 悲), joy (*ki* 喜), and resignation (*sha* 捨); the four bodhisattvas: Fugen 普賢, Monjū 文珠, Kannon 觀音, and Miroku 彌勒;<sup>58</sup> and the four guardian deities who keep watch over the four cardinal directions and protect the Suwa Shrine.<sup>59</sup> The fact that the erection of new pillars takes place every seven years (when the year of a pillar festival is counted as the first year of a cycle) is ascribed to the fact that seven is a sacred number in Buddhist numerology.

VI. A sixth set of theories emphasizes the role of the pillars as cosmic pillars linking heaven, earth, and the underworld of the dead. The belief in a cosmic pillar that joins the three worlds is found throughout Asia and is especially prevalent in Korea. (The mythic Mt. Sumeru in Asia is another expression of this same concept.) These theories speculate that the custom of erecting a pillar was of continental origin and that the people of the Suwa region may originally have erected a single pillar. Of late, according to Miyasaka, ethnologists have sought connections between the Pillar Festival and related practices in other parts of Asia. According to a report by Ōhayashi Tarō, the custom of taking a tree from the forest and drag-

<sup>58</sup> Buddhism was slow to enter Suwa, as the power of the Suwa clan, centered about the Suwa Shrine, was strong and not easily brought under the influence of the central court’s proselytizing efforts. The erection of Buddhist temples within the Suwa Shrine courtyards began in the Kamakura period. Fugen Bosatsu 普賢菩薩 was enshrined at the Kamisha and Senjū Kwannon 千珠觀音 (the thousand armed Goddess of Mercy) was established at the Shimosha. The combined faith of Buddhism and Shintō then continued for 600 years until the Meiji period, when Shintō came under the management of the central government and the Buddhist temples in the Suwa Shrine, as well as in other shrines throughout the nation, were torn down.

<sup>59</sup> I.e., Jikokuten 持国天, Kōmokuten 広目天, Zōchōten 增長天, and Tamonten 多聞天.

ging it to the center of the village, and holding a feast at harvest time or at the new years, for example, is found among hill people throughout southeast Asia.<sup>60</sup>

#### CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

In the Meiji period the nationalization of Shintō shrines, together with the creation of a national compulsory education system, constituted important steps in the creation of a sense of national unity.<sup>61</sup> After the war, the Occupation authorities ordered the Japanese government to sever official ties with the shrines, and the principle of separation of church and state was written into the new constitution. In post-war Japan television, in addition to newspapers and the centrally controlled education system, has emerged as an important means of molding a sense of national consciousness. In the late twentieth century local provincial festivals such as the Pillar Festival have been brought to the attention of a national audience mostly through the television screen. Increased tourism and travel to “the heartland” (ハートランド), and films and videos made by publishing conglomerates such as the Iwanami company and smaller operations such as Visual Folklore, have additionally made it possible for more people outside Nagano prefecture to become acquainted with the Suwa Pillar Festival. The festival’s organizers seem to have reacted to this attention by making an ever growing spectacle of it. The *ki-otoshi*, in particular that of the Shimosha, has come to acquire the trappings of show business. Photos of men riding on logs hurtling down the slope decorate the covers of video cassette programs selling for the equivalent of 100 dollars each and appeared in nearly all the brochures distributed in the 1992 festival year. Through the *ki-otoshi* the Pillar Festival has come to stand for a kind of rough masculinity. Words to a popular song sum up its macho image that has been cultivated in the media: “If you want to see a man, [look at] the once-in-seven-years descent down the *ki-otoshi* slope in Suwa” (*otoko miru nara, shichinen ichido, Suwa no ki-otoshi*

<sup>60</sup> Miyasaka Mitsuki, *Suwa Taisha*, p. 254.

<sup>61</sup> For information about the role of Shintō in the creation of the Japanese nation state in the twentieth century, see Helen Hardacre, *Shintō and the State, 1868–1988* and Carol Gluck, *Japan’s Modern Myths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).



*saka-otoshi* 男見るなら七年一度諏訪の木落し坂落し).<sup>62</sup> In 1968 NHK made a thirty minute film organized around this theme of manly courage. “Giant Trees Run” (*Kyoboku ga hashiru* 巨木が走る), aired on national network television, illustrates the way in which the athletic aspects of the Pillar Festival have been dramatized for popular consumption.

“Giant Trees Run” features four veteran pillar riders in their fifties who have earned the name “pillar man” (*onbashira otoko* 御柱男) and who aim to become the “first rider” (*hananori*) of the biggest pillar: Aki Miya Number One.

A vital healthy life in a natural setting and manly virtues associated with traditional masculine occupations are promoted in shots of the “tree cutting” scene, preceded by the closeup of the ruddy smiling face of a man singing the *kiyari*—the very picture of health and happiness.

Like other films made about *matsuri*, “Giant Trees Run” promotes the bonding of fathers and sons through physical activities limited strictly to males. A pick-up truck traveling up a mountain road stops, and a father and his son get out at the “pillar resting site” to check out pillars that have been labeled and lined up in preparation for the *yamadashi*. The twenty-eight year old son, a novice rider, straddles the Aki Miya Number One, trying it out for size. His fifty-five year old father, a housepainter, is a three-time rider and, the narrator announces, “a warrior” (*tsuwamono* 兵). The next shot shows father and son crouched at the top of the cliff examining the forty-five degree slope that the son will descend on a pillar for the first time this year. The slope plunging down to the highway below appears breathtakingly steep when viewed from the top. This, the narrator tells us, is where a man shows his mettle (*otoko no kokoroiki o shimesu no desu* 男の心意気を示すのです). The young man’s determination to follow in his father’s footsteps is conveyed in a scene in which he is shown running up a steep road, a section of the five kilometers he runs every morning to prepare for the *ki-otoshi*. His runs end at the shrine where he prays for strength and for protection for his legs. We see him with his father again in the kitchen of their home. The camera focuses upon the father giving his son advice on

<sup>62</sup> Miyasaka Mitsuaki, *Suwa Taisha*, p. 220.

how to ride a pillar (while the mother—out of focus and in the background—tends to a child). The son responds by telling the father that he will make him proud.

All the “pillar men” introduced in the film are blue-collar workers: reliable men, it is suggested, with the maturity and skill needed to successfully ride the pillars. We are introduced to a fifty-three year old cab driver, a six-time veteran who followed in his father’s footsteps and rode a pillar for the first time when he was sixteen. We see him at a community center, teaching young boys the movements of the sandal juggling dance to be performed in the *satobiki* parade. He talks about the challenge of riding the pillars; there are no guarantees of success or safety; not an activity for the foolish or faint-hearted.

The theme of danger is dramatized by shots of the *Kamisha kiotoshi*. Men perch precariously on the *medoteko* beams as the pillar slides down the steep *kiotoshi* slope, and there is extensive footage of men braving the cold water as they maneuver the pillar in the *kawagoshi* “river-crossing.”

But daring and courage are counterbalanced by an emphasis on planning and readiness. A bus bringing policemen and firemen from other locations in Nagano prefecture to Suwa is shown to dramatize the precautions taken to ensure as safe a *kiotoshi* as possible. The narrator warns that during the previous festival one man was killed and twenty-nine were injured. A large group of uniformed officials are shown examining the *kiotoshi* slope. The theme of preparedness is further underscored by shots of a medical center, where men prepare oxygen tanks and nurses in starched white uniforms carry large boxes of supplies to a waiting ambulance.

The theme of (mature) manliness is dramatized again as a fifty-five year old factory worker who first rode the pillar nineteen years ago, and a fifty-one year old carpenter, a three-time rider, are introduced. We see the factory worker first in his workclothes, examining a lens, and then at the men’s hall where the men in charge of the Aki Miya Number One have gathered to discuss their roles in the festival. Representatives of the different parishes, all of them workmen, introduce themselves, some abruptly and awkwardly with an air of embarrassment. The walls are dingy and the atmosphere is

noisy and den-like. The men drink, smoke, and talk. A man slaps the factory worker on the shoulder. The words “You’re a man!” (*otoko da yo!*) are heard repeated several times.

The carpenter is shown working on a roof with his fellow crew members and later smoking and relaxing with them in his shop. His face, though kindly, appears coarse and distorted with its protruding teeth and deep lines—the face of a race of men who have spent many years at hard physical labor outdoors in a cold windy climate. Seeing the carpenter sawing and hammering, and the taxi driver as he washes his cab, and the factory worker as he inspects a lens, the viewer gets the subliminal message that these are competent, careful, and reliable workers, men who would know how to prepare for a challenge as risky as the *ki-otoshi*.

On the morning of the Shimosha *ki-otoshi* the house painter and his son walk through town in the special close-fitting garments worn by workmen (and pillar men), who need to move quickly and surely. The narrator carefully introduces each of the garments by name, reminding the viewer of the tradition of the woodcutter in Nagano. The sequence of the all-important *ki-otoshi* pillars is duly intoned: Haru Miya Number Three; Aki Miya Number Two; Haru Miya Number Four; Aki Miya Number Four; Haru Miya Number Two; Aki Miya Number One. The narrator notes that experienced riders are seldom injured; it is the inexperienced hotheads in the crowd who rush to jump on the pillars as they reach the bottom of the slope who get hurt. A man is injured and taken away in an ambulance, the fourth accident this year. The atmosphere becomes tense as men gear up for the competition of riding the Aki Miya Number One. Soon a fight erupts. A flurry of waving arms and legs. The wail of *kiyari*. A crowd of men clustered around the pillar perched on the edge of the cliff. Our last glimpse of the young novice finds him among many other pillar men seated on the Aki Miya Number Three pillar just before it is pushed off the edge of the slope. He appears crushed in the crowd of seasoned jostling riders. The log plunges, the lead rider is identified as a construction worker named Fujiwara. The ride is over in seconds. The *ki-otoshi* slope is covered with the bodies of men who have run out to mount the pillar before it comes to a halt. The film that opened with a shot of a pillar lurching off the lip of the cliff as heavy metal music with a rapid drum

beat played in the background ends with the camera focused once again on the *ki-otoshi* slope to the sound of heavy metal. While its visual images are of a traditional country festival in which mature Japanese men display foresight, skill, and courage, its music sound track suggests the youth culture of an urban westernized Japan.

“Suwa Pillar Festival” (*Suwa onbashira matsuri*), aired on a commercial television station in Tokyo in May, 1992, celebrates community and underlines the festival’s meaning for male and female, young and old, by presenting an idealized picture of social harmony in a beautiful lakeside setting. Focusing mostly upon the *satobiki* and “pillar erecting” segments, as opposed to the *ki-otoshi*, the film introduces the festival as a community affair in which all can participate. It lasts fifteen minutes, and with about 165 different frames at an average of eleven frames per minute, it is a fast-paced film that might well be retitled “glimpses of a festival for busy people.” It reels through shots of the lake, the shrines, the shrine crests, priests and *ujiko* at a *miwatari* rite by the frozen lakeshore, and *ujiko* twisting straw for the ropes. A light tune with a “New Age” feel played on an amplified acoustic guitar sets the pace for the quick, light presentation of the festival, suggestive of a modern progressive Japan.

The theme of inter-generational harmony is introduced when an eighty-year old man, who holds the hereditary role of “rope winder” (*tsunamaki*), instructs his grandson in the art of wrapping a rope around the pillar. The boy practices at home in the winter on a small model under the watchful eye of his grandfather. There are a fair number of older people in the film, including a frail-looking Dr. Takei who is shown leading a *kiyari*, and a humpbacked grandmother pulling a rope. There are also many small children, and groups of young people, organized into age cohorts, engaged in *kiyari* singing, dancing, and eating. Emphasizing the theme of inclusiveness, the film focuses generously upon the role of women, who in pre-war days were prohibited from touching or pulling the pillars. Most women, however, are shown engaged in traditional activities: buying groceries, making shrimp tempura and sushi, feeding guests (the average household prepares food for an anticipated eighty people), sharing food, and tending children. The narrator, whose voice is mellow and soothing, asks “What is a festival?” The answer is implied in the footage of people doing things together,

mostly outdoors in the sunshine. The camera cuts from a scene of young girls happily munching on snacks to a scene of men in work clothes maneuvering a pillar around a bend. Through the presentation of people in groups, the theme of people deriving satisfaction from living and working together in a festival is communicated in nearly every frame. The narrator, as solicitous as a middle-school teacher, asks at one point, are not these the faces of people who are fulfilled and happy?

A similar message concludes the Iwanami publishing company's 1986 film "Suwa Pillars" (*Suwa onbashira*), in which a crowded city sidewalk appears and the narrator comments on how the meaning of *kami* is lost in an urban setting where people are disconnected from one another. The contrasting shot of a *gohei* fluttering in the breeze on top of a pillar against the background of the beautiful Yatsugatake Range is a rhetorically powerful means of impressing upon the viewer the benefits of traditional social activities in the natural setting of a provincial community.

A similar didactic tone is mixed with a good dose of humor and self-conscious role-playing in the NHK broadcast of the 1992 festival: "The Suwa Pillar Festival: a message from the past" (*Suwa onbashira matsuri: kodai kara no messeji* 諏訪御柱祭り:古代からのメッセージ).<sup>63</sup>

The film incorporates the festival into the on-going public debate about the identity of Japan and the meaning of Japanese culture that has occupied intellectuals and journalists since the Meiji period. The live two-and-a-half-hour broadcast conveyed by satellite transmission is a study in contrasts that juxtaposes a late twentieth-century, western tele-communication style with a discussion of the festival's connection with the formation of Japanese identity in the neolithic Jōmon period, three thousand years ago.

The staged playful quality of the discussion is obvious from the start in the unexpected and somewhat startling setting: the panel of "experts" assembled to discuss the festival's "message from the past" is seated outdoors at a rough-hewn table under some trees in front of a cluster of reconstructed Jōmon period huts made of mud,

<sup>63</sup> I am indebted to Hirai Naofusa and Mogi Sakae of the Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics at Kokugakuin University for sending me a copy of this video.

reeds, and twigs. The hostess is the actress Arai Harumi, who, by virtue of the fact that her paternal grandfather is from Suwa, has been selected to interview the four men gathered together to share their informed opinions on *onbashira* with the television audience. The first guest, Harada Taiji, a well-known Tokyo design artist who grew up in Suwa, has tied his long hair back with a leather headband, in keeping with the primitive (and staged) setting. The other panel members are Miyasaka Mitsuki, a local historian who has written extensively about the Pillar Festival; Takada Hiroshi, a novelist who has written novels set in the Suwa region and is seeing the festival for the first time; and Umehara Takeshi, identified as the director of the International Japanese Culture Research Institute (Kokusai Nihon Bunka Kenkyū Sentā) in Kyoto. The wind is blowing. It is a raw day. Arai looks cold in her fashionable green raincoat. Miyasaka and Takada brave the chill wearing only sweaters and suit jackets. Umehara and Harada, both sturdy men, seem best equipped to withstand the cold. The impression of cold is sufficient to move the viewer to reflect on the inconvenience of life during Jōmon days.

The panel members fall into the spirit of the occasion and obligingly exercise their imaginations in decoding “the message of the past.” The lively enthusiasm of their “readings” provides a good show, in keeping with the exuberant festival atmosphere. The recurring theme of their discussion is the connection between *onbashira* and the Jōmon era of three millennia ago. Suwa is described as having once been the center of Jōmon culture, when the climate was warmer, and plant and animal life were more abundant. Umehara refers to the area as the capital (*miyako*) of Japan during the Jōmon period (a startling statement for some viewers, perhaps, accustomed to the traditional view that the people of the Japanese islands were simple migrant hunter-gatherers and that there was no Japan, much less a “capital” of Japan, in those remote times). The Pillar Festival is described as Japan’s oldest festival and one that holds the key to the puzzle of Jōmon culture. This festival, says Professor Umehara, is the kind in which everyone can participate, as they could during the Jōmon period, unlike the festivals of the later Yayoi period (Japan’s bronze age, when metal implements for cutting the trees would presumably have been introduced), which were

more in the nature of spectacles to be passively watched. Miyasaka, who is seeing the Pillar Festival this year for the seventh time, hears the “voice of Jōmon” (*Jōmon no koe*) in the *kiyari*.

Discussion by the panel members is interspersed with shots of Lake Suwa, the Yatsugatake Range, and the shrines. Maps are held up to pinpoint locations. Arai pulls out a chart that outlines theories of the meaning of the pillars. She talks about her mother’s girlhood experiences at the festival. Miyasaka discusses traditional taboos on the participation of women. Harada discusses the notion of Japan as a culture of wood (*ki no bunka*) and how natural it is for a Japanese festival to be centered upon trees. References are made to the Ise Shrine, rebuilt once every twenty years, and to the pillars at that shrine and at the Izumo Shrine. Harada points out that the Suwa Shrine pillars would not last twenty years, and the panel discusses the meaning of the seven-year cycle. Miyasaka brings in the connection between the wooden pillars and phallic-shaped stones that have been discovered in Kanazawa. Footage shifts to photos of a national park of pillar remains in Kanazawa City on the Japan Sea coast. These remains are located in a series of holes arranged in a circle. The panelists speculate that the pillars were originally erected before the large graves of important people, to enable their souls to ascend to the realm of the *kami*, and as the custom of erecting many pillars declined, what had once been a circle of pillars became a square marked by only four pillars. Harada suggests that people at first tried to pull up the trees that would be used as pillars by their roots, but later cut the trees because the unsightly roots were rude to the *kami*.

The panel’s discussions are interspersed with footage of the *ki-otoshi* slope and commentary delivered by an NHK reporter, a middle-aged man who wears a pink *happi* in the spirit of the occasion. The rest of his apparel—eyeglasses, earphones, and a hand-held microphone—are the familiar tools of trade that mark him as a reporter for the prestigious and influential national television broadcasting company. He is accompanied by an elderly, tanned, white-haired man wearing a pale yellow *happi*, a former pillar man and veteran of many rides down the steep slope before which he now sits, sheltered from the wind and rain by the shed from which he and the reporter watch the *ki-otoshi* proceedings. The conversation

of the pillar man, who smiles often, showing a pair of gleaming white teeth, consists mostly of just “Yes, that’s so” (*Sō desu ne*), and “That’s probably so” (*Sō deshō*) in response to the reporter’s valiant attempts to maintain a flow of conversation for the television audiences at home.

Indeed, most of the two and a half hours of broadcasting time is spent waiting for the *ki-otoshi* of the Haru Miya Number Four and the Aki Miya Number One pillars, scheduled to take place at 2 and 3 p.m. respectively. The NHK reporter makes contact with other reporters who move about in the crowd of pillar men. The camera pans the standing crowd of spectators waiting patiently in a light rain for the day’s events to begin. About 12,000 people are gathered on both sides of the steep slope where the pillars are to run and on the other side of the national highway at the bottom of the slope. A helicopter hovering overhead broadcasts aerial shots of the waiting crowds that spread out in formations reminiscent of spectator crowds at golf tournaments.

A uniformed brass band plays under the direction of a band leader at the top of the hill. Firecrackers go off. Balloons, banners, *sakaki* branches festooned with white streamers, and *onbe* fluttering in the cold wind help to mark the location of the all-important pillars waiting at the top of the slope. Men in *happi* take turns standing on the pillar hanging over the cliff top and leading other men in the *kiyari*. Men standing at the *motozuna* “main rope” push and pull on the ropes to make the pillar sway.

When the rope securing the pillar to the “*onbashira* pine tree” on top of the slope is to be finally cut, the thin-legged axeman wearing a Tyrolean-style hat (clearly not a person who does physical labor for a living) is not strong enough to strike a decisive blow with the axe, and the blade is deflected off the thick rope. Others join in to assist, and the pillar leaves its moorings, scattering riders as it lurches off the cliff top. As it moves toward the bottom of the slope, dozens of men fly upon it, flailing away with arms and legs, punching and shoving and kicking as they vie for a seat.



ONBASHIRA AS RETRIEVAL OF THE PAST  
AND RENEWAL FOR THE FUTURE

The people of Suwa no longer depend on Takeminakata for success in hunting, or protection of their crops, or success in war.

Technological interventions (e.g., cars to transport *ujiko* part way up the mountain, cranes to move the pillars from the *bassai* felling site to the *onbashira okiba* waiting site, electrically powered winches to help erect the pillar at the *tateonbashira* rite) have altered some of the physical activities of the festival. Growing urbanization and the building of more roads have altered the ambiance of the route over which the pillars are pulled. The large trees that once lined the roadside leading to the Shimosha have been cut down to expand the highway, and taken with them into oblivion the feeling of the sacred they once imparted to that section of road where the pillars are pulled. Large trees have also been disappearing from the shrine wood on Okoya Mountain. The loss has been so severe in fact, that in the 1992 Pillar Festival only the Hon Miya Number One pillar measured up to its prescribed size, and the alternative of taking trees from the Shimosha wood was broached.

The economic successes of local Suwa industries and the growing affluence of the community, along with television and other technological innovations, have led to larger and more elaborate festival entertainments since the end of the Pacific War. The nation-wide *furusato-zukuri* project has further fostered the promotion of festivals such as the Suwa Pillar Festival.<sup>64</sup> And communications technology has stimulated the role-playing aspect of the festival. *Ujiko* who previously performed for the *kami* and each other now perform for a national audience on television. Often the same *ujiko* appear in several films and acquire a kind of stardom. The factory worker who appeared in "Giant Trees Run," for example, is shown standing on a pillar and leading a chorus of chanting men in the film "The Pillar Festival," and the house painter who appears with his son throughout "Giant Trees Run" is interviewed in "The Pillar Festival."

<sup>64</sup> See Jennifer Robertson for a discussion of the role of festivals in the *furusato zukuri* movement.

Of late, Pillar Festival participants and promoters have also been aware of performing for an international audience. In addition to engineers from Europe and the United States who work at high tech firms in the Suwa basin, foreign guests hosted by organizations such as Suwa International Rotary and the Suwa International Friendship Society have figured on the scene in recent festivals. The sister city relationship has also played a role, in this case, Suwa-St. Louis. In 1991 Suwa sent the young *taiko* drum corps, that opens the *satobiki* with a rousing performance before Suwa Station to “awaken” the *kami*, to St. Louis to perform. And the city of St. Louis planned to send a delegation of twenty representatives to the Shimosha *satobiki*.

The geographic scope of *kami* efficacy has thus spread. Once worshiped locally as a *kami* to protect the Suwa region from potential invasion from other parts of Japan, the Suwa *kami* was later called upon to protect Japanese in their encounters with people outside Japan: first Asians (Koreans and Mongols), then Westerners as the West supplanted the Asian continent as the dominant Other. Today, the festival is a means by which Suwa can claim international attention. As writings by Miyasaka Mitsuaki and Miyasaka Kiyomichi suggest, Japanese ethnologists have manifested a growing interest in setting the Pillar Festival alongside celebrations involving trees in other parts of the world. So far, the findings suggest that few festivals measure up to the Pillar Festival in the extent and detail of their planning or the numbers of their participants.

Ironically, at the same time that it has become a vehicle for displaying “Japaneseness,” the festival has also become more Americanized. Just as the bronze character-embossed seal of the Shimosha bespoke a moment centuries ago when cultural influences absorbed from the mainland would begin to transform life in Japan for hundreds of years to come, today features such as the inclusion of women in the festival, and the athletic atmosphere of the *kawagoshi* and *ki-otoshi*, complete with whistles, bugling, and band music of the sort associated with baseball stadiums, bespeak an American influence. And pillar-riding down the *ki-otoshi* slope may be seen as the Japanese equivalent of the American rodeo, in which late twentieth-century men demonstrate skills of a kind no longer needed for economic survival.

Despite politico-economic and technological changes in the society at large, the Pillar Festival continues to serve as a means of retrieving the past, renewing relationships with nature and community, and infusing psychic health and balance into the lives of participants.

Through its rites, dedicated to its *ujigami* Takeminakata, the community reawakens historical memory and reconnects with its myth of divine origin. The Pillar Festival is a time for townspeople and former residents to renew their identities as *ujiko* of the Suwa Shrine, to visit local historical museums, and for members of “culture preservation societies” to come together to sponsor a *nagamochi*, or contribute to the horsemen’s parade. Through an emphasis upon the hereditary functions and the special terms used by the *yamazukuri*, the *tsunamaki*, and others whose families have held special roles in the Pillar Festival for centuries, *onbashira* resuscitates a special identity, which is further reinforced through the use of special sacra with special names (e.g., *nagigama*, *onbe*). The atavistic turn is enhanced by the strangely moving cry of the *kiyari*, coming from woods and mountain, fields and town throughout the festival. Processions in which *ujiko* display costumes harkening back to feudal times are further reminders of a shared historical identity.

Marking life into seven-year stages, the festival invites participants to reflect on the meaning of community and the cultural and spiritual inheritance bequeathed by their ancestors. A number of residents, including a local “official” historian, explained to me that the festival was a gift of the *kami* to their ancestors to teach them to cooperate, that what one individual could never accomplish alone could be done when all, literally, pulled together. Local competitions between individual village teams notwithstanding, for hundreds of years the *onbashira* has been a social force uniting the people of the area into a common unit working toward a common goal. Rituals performed by ancestors and passed down to the present give the participants a sense of transgenerational continuity dating back through history and legend to the distant mythical past. Consciousness of one’s identity as an “inside” person, an *ujiko* of the Suwa Shrine, is reinforced through the ritual objects, chants, and songs that are specific to the festival.

*Onbashira*’s promise of renewal is symbolized by the new pillar—

at once a dead tree and a living *kami*—that replaces the old pillar every seven years. The tree brought down from the mountain to the town with ropes woven of straw from local rice paddies also symbolizes the tie that binds *ujiko* to nature and to *kami*.

The renewal of this relationship with nature is established intensely and unforgettably over a period of several months at a time of the year when nature is at its most stimulating. A sense of union with nature is recaptured, especially for today's *ujiko*, who mostly work indoors, as they walk up the mountain to the woods in the snow, experience the chilling mountain winds, handle the rough straw ropes, pull heavy pillars over the fields in early spring, and erect them in the shrine precincts under the sun-flecked canopies of burgeoning leaves in May. For some of the young men the experience of intimacy is even greater as they mount and ride the tree trunks, "bathe" with them, stand on them as they are pulled through the town, and cling to them when they are erected in the shrine precincts.

The ability of the Pillar Festival to produce in its participants a renewed sense of belonging to the earth and to a group of people with a common past is also due, and in large part, to the sheer scale of the festival and its duration over many months.

For four months local residents are assailed by the sound of *kiyari* coming from all quarters. And during the *yamadashi* and *satobiki* phases, the sounds are amplified by thousands of voices and reflected in the rhythms of body gestures repeated countless times by thousands of fellow men (and to a lesser extent, women). The steady cumulative effect of those activities is overpowering. As the pillar pulling procession travels over the land, celebrants lend momentum to the forward movement of the giant pillars through their stylized motions of raising *onbe* sticks in unison with the chants of "*wasshoi, wasshoi.*" This rhythmic force regulates the movements of the *hikinin* pullers and *tekobō-shū* pushers, and of the men who stand on the *medoteko* beams and help the pillar along by gesturing with their arms. The pillars move along routes traced upon the surface of the earth according to a prescribed cadence as movement gives way to cessation of movement at designated intervals for "resting," "washing," "purifying," and "dressing the pillars." These intoxicating rhythmic forces seem to integrate participants and their

surroundings into a yet larger rhythm that unites them all. The continual processions and flow of human beings pressing on toward the shrines with sounds of shouting, whistling, and *kiyari* creates an inexorable forward momentum that will cease only when the pillars are raised and pointing into the sky.

In writing about the “Rio Carnaval” Victor Turner describes the experience of *ilinx* or vertigo involved in games and play that create disequilibrium or imbalance or otherwise alter perception or consciousness by inducing giddiness or dizziness.<sup>65</sup> The Pillar Festival celebrant experiences a similar euphoric transport through the endlessly repeated rhythmic movements and vocalizations, the large number of participants, and the tension in which they live for months on end. A number of young men I interviewed in 1992, for example, members of the *tekobō-shū* lever squad, spoke of the “frightening” (“*kowai*” こわい) and-all consuming “pillar fever” (“*on-bashira netsu*”) they experienced from February to May.

Other celebrants spoke of a sensation of being swept up and held in something larger than themselves. For other participants *on-bashira* offers an opportunity to forget and lose the self in a completely engrossing activity in which the individual becomes one with the environment as children might. Normally inhibited young men paint their faces, dress in outlandish costumes (or go semi-naked), and display themselves in public. Loud vocalizations, obstreperous behavior, and rambunctious physicality are encouraged. The Pillar Festival, like the “Rio Carnaval,” seems to be “propelled by *paidia* (childhood play),” with the free improvisation and carefree gaiety that mark the “anarchic and capricious propensity characteristic of children.”<sup>66</sup>

*Matsuri* is referenced by the image of a return to a childlike state through its language as well, which positions the *ujiko* vis-a-vis the clan (*uji*) and clan *kami* (*ujigami*) in a relationship analogous to that of parent and child. Traditional Japanese beliefs hold that children

<sup>65</sup> Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986), pp. 123–38.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129. The concepts of ludic and paidiac play are contained in Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans., Meyer Barash (New York: Schocken Books, 1979). These and his other categories of play: agon, alea, mimesis, and *ilinx* (vertigo) have often been cited in literary and anthropological studies that employ the concept of play.

are the gifts of the *kami* and that childhood is the state in which humans come closest to *kami*. In Shintō, as an adult, one is closest to the *kami* when one's heart is "clear," and one's mind and intention, guileless, as a child's. In *matsuri*, the presence of *kami* provides a context for a return to an uninhibited childlike state of celebration of one's physical being and simple enjoyment of sensuous contact with nature. *Matsuri* through its explicit focus upon the child (e.g., the elaborately clothed and powdered child daimyō, who leads the parade and in whom the *kami* resides) exemplifies the insight articulated by Turner, who found the clue to the basic feature of Carnaval to lie in its return, through play, to "childhood's golden land."<sup>67</sup>

A counterpart to the paidiac play seen in the *kawagoshi* and *kiotoshi*, where men tumble and roll about, and in the town parades, where they dance about, engage in horseplay, and disport themselves freely in various stages of dress and undress, is the ludic aspect of play found in the strict rituals.

*Ludus* (characterized by highly organized absolute forms and rules) can be found in the rules that regulate the spatial and temporal limits within which the festival takes place. It can be seen in the careful balance between tiger and monkey years and days, and in their alternation which creates a complicated pattern of time cycles revolving within time cycles. Strict rules govern the placement of objects, ranging from the huge pillars and their "resting places" (*onbashira okiba*) and "estates" (*onbashira yashiki*) to the arrangement of the purified cutting tools at the *hiire* and *bassai* and *tateonbashira* sites. Numerical relationships are similarly regulated. Axes at the *bassai* are struck three times by priests and three times by *ujiko*. Saws are used three times by priests, followed by three times by *ujiko*. Shimosha woods are half the distance from their shrine as the woods of the Kamisha from their shrine. Stages of the festival evidence a careful inclusion of all five elements (*gogyō* 五行): wood in the tree-pillar; fire in the purifying *hiire*; metal in the *nagigama* and in the cutting tools; water in the purifying "god washing" (*kami-arai*) and "river crossing" (*kawagoshi*), earth in the earth-pounding with wooden mallets to make the pillars stand still.

The Pillar Festival also incorporates *alea* (luck or chance). Men

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

may compete with one another and perform austerities and spiritual exercises to enhance their luck at the lot-drawing ceremony, but ultimately the lot they draw, and the pillar they pull, is decided by the luck of the draw. Tree-cutting is decided by lottery. Pillar-riding is a combination of skill *and* luck, and men who die or are injured are said to have been taken by forces outside themselves.

Agonistic displays of skill and determination are as much a part of the festival as is cooperation. Events such as the *ki-otoshi* and *kawagoshi* offer outlets for individual competition in a group-first society where people “pull together.” Teams are pitted against teams in pulling the pillars in the *yamadashi* and *satobiki*; groups vie with groups in putting on a show in the *nagamochi* parade. According to Miyasaka Mitsuaki, the Pillar Festival once offered local folk the opportunity to display their strength and vitality, in a kind of threat display, to manifest to outsiders their resolve to stand firm against interference. Today, the men of Suwa, once renowned as doughty warriors, are called “warriors” still, and a local song and pictures and videos spread word of the courage of these pillar men. The festival is a source of pride for the local population, some of whom claim to have “the oldest festival” in Japan. And as Miyasaka Mitsuaki suggests, Japanese ethnographers have lately begun to compare the Pillar Festival to other festivals in Asia (Korea, Tibet, Cambodia, and India) centered upon trees; and the Pillar Festival, of course, has emerged as the premier tree festival of them all. In “Visual Folklore” shots appear of single pillars being dragged into the village for use in rituals in Tibet and India; next to the enormous size of the pillars of the highly organized Suwa Pillar Festival, these Asian counterparts look poor and puny. Nor do the May poles of Europe depicted in the film measure up to the magnificent Suwa Pillars.

Role-playing in this festival is undertaken with great solemnity. The celebrants assume new identities, as *yamazukuri*, *tekobō-shū*, *hikinin* “pullers,” *tsunamaki* “rope winders,” and so forth. Their freely assumed identities are displayed in the special clothes they wear, the special tools they use, their special vocalizations, and the special austerities they observe prior to and during the festival. Celebrants become even further engaged in role-playing when they appear in front of the cameras. The men in “Large Trees Run,” for example,

perform both in the festival and for the television audience, adhering faithfully to the conventions of costume, of prescribed behaviors, and the courageous dignified demeanor expected of pillar men.

The members of the panel of experts organized by NHK and interviewed by a professional actress, play their roles with panache. Allowing themselves to be filmed in front of imitation Jōmon period huts, they lend their presence to the endorsement of the claim (not taken seriously in significant academic circles) that the Suwa Pillar Festival dates back to the Jōmon period and is the oldest festival in Japan. Their free-wheeling associations, spun off for the edification and entertainment of television audiences, are generated in a spirit of fun. The ludic quality of their speculations is further underlined by the frequent bursts of laughter from the actress moderating the discussion. In a spirit of play, they contribute to a television broadcast that teaches what is to be Japanese, and at the same time, parody that lesson. As one watches the panelists, one is led to reflect again upon the ubiquity of role-playing in Japanese culture, and the seeming willingness and readiness with which many members of this society retrieve the child retained within.

*Onbashira* transforms spaces normally reserved for the conduct of business, government, and commerce into a giant playground for *kami asobi* 神遊び (“god play” or entertaining the *kami*). A highway is renamed the “pillar highway” (*onbashira kaidō*) and becomes the site for greeting the *kami*. Once ordinary work clothes and activities (e.g., woodcutting) become patterns of color, movement, and sound that iconicize the landscape, turning it into a space for play.

Play pervades even those aspects closest to the sacred core of the *matsuri*. Even the sacred trees in this festival are assigned a role to play. What Turner calls the subjunctive “as if” mode of festival is doubly underlined in the words sung in the *kiyari*. These words attest to the make-believe that the pillars become not *kami*, but *as if* they were *kami*. According to the lyrics, trees descend to the town (*sato ni orite* 里に降りて) and become *as kami* (*kami to naru* 神となる). As if to underline the make-believe quality of it all, seven years later those temporarily sacred trees are hauled off and turned into railroad ties and supports for elevated golf courses.

One might say that in the Pillar Festival, the desire for union with nature is manifested in play that creates a liminal sphere within



which restorative psychic transformation takes place. Through its “theater of mask, trance, simulation, and vertigo” the festival brings about liberating psychic recreation necessary to the life of the people.<sup>68</sup> Erected in the midst of the basin, providing a point of reference and sacralizing the space about them, the new naked pillars promise renewal in visible concrete form, dramatically, with their white bird-like *gohei* on their summits soaring skyward.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 128.