Illuminating Sanja Matsuri

Lived Religion and Festival Practice in Asakusa

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Abstract

This thesis examines *Sanja Matsuri*, a major Shintō and Buddhist festival in Asakusa, Tokyo, through the lenses of lived religion, participant observation, autoethnography, and anthropology. Departing from institution-centered approaches, it foregrounds the experiential dimensions of festival participation, showing how physical devotion, collective movement, and festive intensity function as expressions of spiritual meaning. Ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2023 and 2025 included participant observation, informal interviews with local and foreign participants, and Reflexive Discourse Analysis of fieldnotes and bilingual transcripts. Analysis reveals a dynamic interplay between formal sacralization strategies — such as *mitama-ire* rituals and structured processions — and spontaneous, informal participant practices, including intoxication, shaking of portable shrines, and energetic chanting/movement. I also examine the inclusion of foreign participants, showing how Sanja Matsuri balances cultural openness with continuity of tradition. These practices negotiate, transmit, and sustain religious meaning through bodily engagement and social interaction, rather than solely through the oversight of institutional authority. This research challenges narrow definitions of religion and demonstrates how contemporary festivals function as living sites of devotion, community, and cultural transmission

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Introduction

This thesis comprises one half of a larger, two-part project of the same name. The second half, an *Illuminated Mangascript*, is designed for public engagement. While this study presents the academic analysis, the companion piece, *Illuminating Sanja Matsuri*, translates these themes into a visual and narrative form for teenage and adult audiences.

In mid-May, the streets of Asakusa, Tokyo, transform into a scene of sound and movement for one of the city's largest celebrations, *Sanja Matsuri*.[1] Participants carry one-ton portable shrines, called *mikoshi*, through crowded streets while chanting, often drinking, and moving in tightly coordinated formations[2]. The atmosphere is intense and chaotic with bodies pressed together, collective chants echoing through the streets, and the mikoshi being lifted, shaken, and pulled forward through waves of participants and spectators. To outside observers, these moments can appear more like pure celebration than religious practice.

This thesis challenges that assumption. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted during Sanja Matsuri in 2023 and 2025, I argue that the embodied, and at times seemingly chaotic, practices that define the festival are not signs of religious decline, but rather central vehicles through which religious meaning is enacted and experienced. Practices such as chaotic shrine-carrying, communal intoxication, and

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[1] This research would not have been possible without the support of some extraordinary people. I would like to thank Sumi and Celina Ishitate, my informants, tutors, and dear friends, for their dedication in helping me navigate cultural nuance and dialect during translation. I am also grateful to my thesis committee — Ronald Green, PhD, Gillian Richards-Greaves, PhD, and Jeff Case — for their guidance in refining this work. My deepest thanks go to my advisor, Elizabeth Baltes, PhD, who always saw the value in my wild ideas and made research in Tokyo possible. Finally, to my colleague and fellow mikoshi-holder, Gabriel Austin, who accompanied me on this journey. Thank you all, you have my heart.

intense physical movement function as forms of lived religion, transmitting the presence of the kami (Japanese deities) while reinforcing communal identity and belonging.

To break down this dynamic, I draw on scholarship in lived religion, which emphasizes how spiritual meaning is produced through everyday practice rather than confined to institutional doctrine.[3] I also engage Misumi Takafumi's interpretation of *sacralization*, which highlights how festival organizers actively frame events as sites of ritual legitimacy through practices such as *mitama-ire*.[4] While existing scholarship interprets heightened spectacle through the lens of eventization theory — as evidence of secularization or ritual decline — I offer an alternative reading.[5] By focusing on physical participation, it becomes clear that intensity, disorder, and festivity can function as expressions of devotion alongside formal practice.

This research employs participant observation, informal interviews, and Reflexive Discourse Analysis to analyze data collected during Sanja Matsuri in 2025. Participation in a Sunday morning mikoshi procession provided direct insight into the festival's physical and emotional dimensions, while interviews with local and foreign participants revealed how individuals interpret their involvement. These perspectives are analyzed alongside fieldnotes and translated transcripts to examine how religious meaning is articulated and negotiated within the festival environment.

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[3] Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12–13.

[4] This is the ritual transfer of a kami into an object or space such as a portable shrine. See Takafumi Misumi, "The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi: A Case Study of the Mikoshi Parades in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area," *Journal of Living Folklore*, no. 12 (March 2020): 64.

[5] Misumi, "The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi," 65–66; 71–75.

The chapters that follow develop this argument in stages. The theoretical framework outlines key debates in lived religion and festival studies, including sacralization and critiques of eventization. The methods section details the ethnographic and reflexive approach used in this study. Historical context situates Sanja Matsuri within broader patterns of urban festival practice in Japan and compares the festival's origin with modern-day practices. The analysis then explores lived religion in practice through themes of physical devotion, identity and belonging, foreign participation, and the relationship between sacred and festive experience. The final section synthesizes data and considers its broader implications for understanding religion in contemporary public life.

By examining the festival through the lens of lived religion, I demonstrate that religious meaning is not confined to the institutional authority that oversees Sanja Matsuri. It emerges through movement, bodily intensity, and communal participation in public space, where celebration and devotion become inseparable.

Theoretical Framework

Scholarship on lived religion provides an important lens for this research. Work in this interpretive approach within anthropology, sociology, and religious studies focuses on how belief and spiritual expression are enacted in everyday practice, challenging assumptions rooted in institution-centered models of religion that privilege formal doctrine over informal, everyday practice. Performance, material culture, gesture, speech, movement, and silence are treated as blossoming sites where religious meaning is constantly produced and negotiated.[6] This framework is particularly useful for examining

[6] McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 3–4, 11–13; Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices* (New York: NYU Press, 2021), 1–2, 5–6.

Sanja Matsuri, where religious expression unfolds in physical motion, through mikoshi processions and intense shaking, collective chanting, situational intoxication, and neighborhood participation.

A key tension within festival studies emerges in debates surrounding "eventization." Eventization theory suggests that modern festivals increasingly shift from ritual toward spectacle under the pressures of tourism, media, and governance.[7] Within this frame, intensification of spectacle is often read as evidence of ritual or religious breakdown. However, Misumi Takafumi's study of mikoshi processions in the Tokyo metropolitan area offers critical refinement. Misumi identifies a process termed "sacralization," in which organizers strategically reassert ritual meaning through *mitama-ire* — the ritual transfer of a spirit (mitama) into an object or space — reinforcing claims of tradition, and formal ordering practices.[8] He maps festival change along two axes: ritual–event and order–chaos,[9] demonstrating that spectacle and sacralization coexist and fluctuate.

Building upon this, I argue that some applications of eventization theory risk importing secularizing assumptions shaped by post-Christian imperialist frameworks that often interpret spectacle, bodily intensity, or "public disorder" as evidence of religious decline.[10] I suggest a pivoted reading in which practices often categorized as chaotic or secular (mikoshi riding, communal intoxication, intense or violent movement) frequently function as embodied religious acts. Rather than signaling the loss of religion, these

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[7] Misumi, "The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi," 65–66.
[8] Misumi, "The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi," 71–75.
[9] Misumi, "The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi," 65–66.
[10] Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion*, 2, 6; McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 11–12.

actions materially convey the presence of the kami and reproduce communal belonging through shared bodily exertion and the transmission of cultural value.

Reading Misumi alongside lived religion scholarship allows sacralization to be understood as negotiated practice. Organizers' ritual framing interacts with participants' embodied devotion, producing forms of spiritual expression enacted in streets and informal settings instead of solely within institutional settings.[11] Misumi's framework also helps clarify why many local interviewees welcomed foreign involvement.[12] When mikoshi-carrying is framed as a public transmission of tradition, participation becomes more a matter of legitimacy than of exclusion. For some residents, allowing foreigners to wear happi and shoulder mikoshi demonstrates that tradition is living and transmissible. Participants may accept organizers' sacralizing discourse while simultaneously expanding their boundaries through inclusive practice. In this way, sacralization creates new negotiations over belonging.

For this research, I combine the perspectives of lived religion, participant observation, autoethnography, and Misumi's matsuri-based concept of sacralization. These merged perspectives allow participation in Sanja Matsuri to be examined as an atmosphere in which religious meaning is enacted, negotiated, and transmitted through bodily practice and communal interaction, often regardless of institutional approval.

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[11] See Misumi, "The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi," 73–74; Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion*, 5–6.
[12] Of all interviews conducted at Sanja Matsuri in 2025, only one participant expressed resistance to foreign involvement with the mikoshi, stating, "Watching is ok, touching [the mikoshi] is not."

Negotiated Tradition and Sacralization

While lived religion highlights participant practice, sacralization provides a framework for understanding how organizers articulate and maintain ritual legitimacy. Within these shifting dynamics, organizers frequently deploy strategies that reaffirm the sacred character of festival activities, including ritual preparation, formal procession structures, and narratives emphasizing historical continuity. The mitama-ire ritual of transferring the kami into a portable vessel, such as a mikoshi, is one of the most important sacralization strategies in this case.[13] In Sanja Matsuri, these sacralizing practices operate alongside participants' spontaneous and embodied forms of engagement. Some common examples include situational intoxication, increased intensity of *tamafuri*, and physical brawls, which have been reported for decades at the festival.[14] Formal ritual authority and informal lived experience, therefore, interact continuously throughout. Organizers frame the procession as a transmission of tradition and spiritual presence, while participants enact that meaning through collective movement, celebration, and participation from both local and foreign communities.

Interpreting Spectacle and Intensity

This framework also provides an alternative reading of previously described behaviors that are sometimes interpreted as evidence of secularization. Eventization

[13] Participant responses in Misumi's article illustrate how mitama-ire reinforces the shift from event to tradition. See Misumi, *"The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi,"* 71–74. See also Minoru Sonoda, "The Traditional Festival in Urban Society," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 2, nos. 2–3 (1975): 107.
[14] *Tamafuri*, which can be roughly translated to "spirit-shaking" is the act of communally shaking/dancing with a mikoshi. Regarding examples of festival brawls, see Misumi, *"The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi,"* 69–70; "Yakuza Nabbed over Brawl at Sanja Matsuri," *Tokyo Reporter*, August 25, 2018; Nam-lin Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensōji and Edo Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000), 120.

theory often treats elements such as heightened spectacle, overly intense physical movement, or festive "disorder" as signs of ritual decline.[15] I argue that, when viewed through the lens of lived religion and embodied ritual practice, these same actions can be understood as mechanisms through which spiritual presence is experienced and shared. Practices such as vigorous mikoshi shaking, communal intoxication, and exuberant public celebration, even mikoshi brawls, do not necessarily signal a loss of religious meaning.[16] Instead, they can and have served as expressions of devotion and collective participation, conveying both the presence of the kami and the community's cultural continuity in a single space.

Gaps in Data

Despite a substantial body of research on Japanese religion, festivals, and lived religion theory, these fields are rarely integrated to examine lived religious practice within festival settings. Studies of Japanese festivals frequently focus on institutional structures, including the roles of local communities, shrine administrations, and municipal authorities, as well as on historical developments that maintain festival traditions and cultural heritage.[17] While these institutional and anthropological

[15] Misumi, *"The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi,"* 65–66.
[16] Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion*, 5; McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 12–13, 15; This is a key convergence of my research and Misumi's. The intersection happens at their conclusion, where "event" shifts to "tradition". See Misumi, *"The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi,"* 74–75.
[17] While Misumi's article is parallel to the arguments of this research, his research is focused on political and cultural factors that include spiritual dynamics rather than examining the religious nature of festival and informal festival practices. See Misumi, *"The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi*;" Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan*; Ray Lucas, "Script and Score: Revisiting Nelson Goodman at Sanja Matsuri – Japan," in *Architecture, Festival and the City*, 81–96 (London: Routledge, 2018); A. W. Sadler, "Carrying the Mikoshi: Further Field Notes on the Shrine Festival in Modern Tokyo," *Asian Folklore Studies* 31, no. 1 (1972): 89–114; Minoru Sonoda, "The Traditional Festival in Urban Society," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 2, nos. 2–3 (1975), 103–36.

perspectives provide important insights into festival organization and continuity, they often leave the experiential dimensions of participation underexplored. The perspectives of those who carry mikoshi, participate in neighborhood groups or shrine organizations, and engage directly in festival activities are rarely examined as sources of religious meaning and expression.

Within festival scholarship, behaviors commonly associated with festive intensity are often interpreted through analytical frameworks, eventization theory being a prime example, that emphasize the shift to "event" a sign of secularization.[18] The physical and embodied dimensions of festival participation remain relatively underexamined within discussions of Japanese religious practice. Activities such as carrying and shaking a mikoshi and coordinating collective movement require significant bodily engagement and cooperation among participants. These actions are often described within festival literature but less frequently analyzed as forms of religious practice in themselves.[19] Examining these experiences can therefore provide deeper insight into how spiritual meaning is produced and transmitted during festival participation.

This work contributes to this growing body of scholarship by focusing on how religious meaning is enacted through embodied participation in festival practices. In doing so, I highlight the ways festival activities that may appear chaotic or purely celebratory can also function as meaningful expressions of lived religious experience.

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[18] Misumi, *"The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi,"* 65–66.
[19] As a participant and observer, I can attest to the strength and often times intuitive coordination required to lift, shake, and move a mikoshi. For other examples see A. W. Sadler, "Carrying the Mikoshi: Further Field Notes on the Shrine Festival in Modern Tokyo," *Asian Folklore Studies* 31, no. 1 (1972): 89–114; Ray Lucas, "Script and Score: Revisiting Nelson Goodman at Sanja Matsuri – Japan," in *Architecture, Festival and the City*, 81–96 (London: Routledge, 2018).

Methods of Observation

This research is heavily supported by ethnographic fieldwork conducted during multiple visits to Tokyo. Initial observation took place during Sanja Matsuri in 2023, followed by extended participant observation during the 2025 festival. This allowed for a preliminary learning period, which later developed into deeper engagement with festival practices during the second visit. Following principles of robust reflexivity, the earlier visit informed later research decisions, shaping *where* observations were conducted and *how* interactions with participants were approached.[20] The 2023 visit primarily involved observational research, figuring out *what*, *how*, and *why* of the event. I focused on documenting the festival's structure, common practices, and, most importantly, patterns of participant interaction in the streets of Asakusa. These observations provided an initial understanding of the festival's rhythm, ritual sequence, and extent of neighborhood participation. Over the next two years, additional preliminary information was gathered, and IRB certification was obtained with the intent of returning to Sanja Matsuri.

During the 2025 festival, I conducted participant observation by actively joining a mikoshi procession alongside local participants. This form of embodied participation allowed for closer examination of the physical coordination, social dynamics, and emotional intensity associated with carrying a mikoshi. My role as a researcher facilitated trust-building with local participants, who were often curious about the purpose of the

[20] Reflexivity involves understanding how researcher decisions and positionality shape the research process over time. See Catherine Trundle, Natalie Araújo, Sumaira Khan, and Tarryn Phillips, “Beyond the Mirror: Challenging the Common Assumptions of Reflexivity in Qualitative Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 24 (2025), 2-3.

research and willing to share their perspectives.[21] Participating directly in the procession also provided insight into how participants interpret and experience festival activities as meaningful communal practices that bring friends and family together.

Fieldwork focused primarily on the Asakusa district of Tokyo, particularly the areas surrounding Sensō-ji Temple and Asakusa Shrine, where Sanja Matsuri is centered. Observations were conducted before and throughout the festival period (Thursday, May 15 – Sunday, May 18), including preparatory activities, neighborhood processions, and main events such as the opening Daigyoretsu.

Interviews

To support participant observation, this research incorporates informal interviews with approximately twenty festival participants. Interviewees included local residents, members of neighborhood mikoshi groups and festival organizations, event organizers, and foreign participants who were both involved in carrying mikoshi and passively observing the festival.

Participants were recruited informally during festival activities and in opportunistic moments between events. This approach enabled access to individuals actively involved in the festival while maintaining a conversational, flexible interview environment suited to the dynamic, often crowded setting of Sanja Matsuri. Interviews were conducted in both Japanese and English, depending on participant preference. Conversations were documented through written fieldnotes and, when permitted, audio

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[21] This level of access would not have been possible without the support of Asakusa locals, two of whom informally served as cultural gatekeepers. It is important to acknowledge that my position as a researcher, combined with a non-extractive interest in Sanja Matsuri — distinct from more performative or influencer-oriented modes of engagement — likely shaped my ability to participate and the trust required to do so.

recordings. These materials were later carefully transcribed and translated with the guidance of my collaborator and mentor, Sumi Ishitate.[22] In keeping with Reflexive Discourse Analysis, particular attention was given to how translation choices and phrasing could shape the interpretation of participant narratives.

Ethical considerations were addressed by informing participants of the research purpose and ensuring that participation was voluntary.[23] Participants were also informed that their responses would be anonymized. All identifying details were removed during transcription to protect privacy.

Data Analysis

Carolyn Ellis's "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, and Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject" informs the reflexive and interpretive approach used in this analysis. In the section titled "What is Autoethnography," Ellis provides an elegant description stating, "Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural."[24] Her definition is particularly resonant for this research, which draws on both participant observation and self-reflection during fieldwork in Tokyo. Ellis skillfully situates the researcher as an embodied participant whose memories and cultural

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[22] To assist with the transcription process, I used an open-source version of OpenAI's Whisper. The software was modified to run through a Windows PowerShell environment and configured to process Japanese-language audio using an appropriate language model. Audio files were then passed through the program via command-line execution, with transcription output directed into text documents for further analysis. The resulting transcripts were approximately 90% accurate and were subsequently reviewed and corrected by both myself and Sumi to account for dialectal variation and contextual nuance.

[23] Interview material was also incorporated into the *Illuminated Mangascript* portion of this thesis, where selected responses are recontextualized through character dialogue in manga speech bubbles, reflecting the tone and cadence in which they were originally expressed.

[24] C. Ellis and A. Bochner, "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., ed. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (New York: Sage Publications, 2000), 739–43.

positionality become active resources in the research process. This understanding reinforces the reflexive stance outlined by Trundle and is further applied through Audry Alejandro's Reflexive Discourse Analysis.[25] In practice, Ellis's framing validates my interpretive decisions during moments of translation, active participation, and self-reflection. Finding a balance between participant and researcher is key. Those blurred boundaries shaped how understanding aspects of the festival emerged; reflections written during mikoshi processions, casual conversations, and translation sessions became moments where personal experience and cultural observation certainly intersected.

Fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and personal observations were analyzed using qualitative coding methods.[26] This analysis was guided by debates surrounding reflexivity, particularly Catherine Trundle and colleagues' concept of "robust reflexivity," which reframes reflexivity as an ongoing, situated practice that critically examines how knowledge production is shaped by power, translation, and institutional positioning.

This approach is implemented through Alejandro's Reflexive Discourse Analysis (RDA), which extends reflexivity beyond self-disclosure to an analytic method. RDA's three components — compass discourse, textual analysis of one's own production, and self-resocialization — structure the interpretive process used in this study.[27] The guiding principle throughout is a commitment to representing participants' lived religious experiences accurately, respectfully, and with careful attention to context.

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[25] Audrey Alejandro, "Reflexive Discourse Analysis: A Methodology for the Practice of Reflexivity," *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 1 (2021): 152.
[26] Trundle et al., "Beyond the Mirror," 2–3, 6–7.
[27] Alejandro, "Reflexive Discourse Analysis," 152, 156–60.

Iterative coding of fieldnotes and bilingual transcripts, combined with translation checks conducted with my collaborator Sumi Ishitate, prompted ongoing revisions to framing, quotation choices, and analytic language. Particular attention was given to how translation and phrasing shaped the interpretation of participant narratives.

Reflexive analysis was also incorporated to account for my positionality as both participant and observer during the fieldwork process. Throughout the analysis, attention was given to my own participation in the festival, cultural background, upbringing, and language position, which shape the interpretation of events and participant narratives.[28] This reflexive approach helped ensure that interpretations remained attentive to the perspectives and lived experiences of festival participants.

Limitations

All fieldwork-based research includes certain limitations that shape the scope of analysis. This study was conducted within a limited four-day timeframe and focused on a specific area in the Asakusa district. As a result, the observations presented here reflect specific moments within the festival in 2023 and 2025 rather than a comprehensive, multi-year account of Sanja Matsuri activities. Extended research would provide a broader understanding of how participation, organization, and festival practices continue to evolve.

Language also presented occasional challenges during interviews and informal conversations. While interviews were conducted in both Japanese and English, subtle nuances in dialect, phrasing, and cultural context may influence interpretation.

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[28] Alejandro, "Reflexive Discourse Analysis," 152, 155.

Translation assistance and follow-up clarification with Miss Ishitate helped minimize these limitations and ensure greater accuracy during transcription and analysis.

Weather conditions and crowd density also influenced access to certain areas and participants. For example, on Saturday, May 17th, several scheduled events were canceled due to intense precipitation, although the mikoshi processions continued largely uninterrupted.[29] These conditions uniquely provided more access to participants but also reflected the unpredictable and dynamic environment in which the festival takes place.

Finally, my positionality as a foreign participant shaped interactions with other festival participants. While this positionality occasionally created barriers to access or interpretation, it also facilitated unique forms of engagement, particularly with foreign mikoshi carriers and participants interested in sharing their perspectives with an outside researcher. Recognizing these limitations is essential for situating data within the specific social and environmental conditions of the time.

Historical Context

Sanja Matsuri is an annual 3-day festival held at Sensō-ji temple in Asakusa, Tokyo. Typically, it occurs throughout the weekend of the third week of May.[30] The festival synthesizes elements from Buddhism, specifically the Shōkannon sect, and Shintō practice.

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[29] During the downpour, many participants showed signs of increased energy and were often seen smiling or laughing. I noted an increased intensity of mikoshi shaking. The rain was a welcomed informality despite leading to some formal events being canceled.

[30] Misumi, *"The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi,"* 66–67; Ronald S. Green, *Shintō in the History and Culture of Japan* (Association for Asian Studies, 2020).

Sanja Matsuri is widely recognized as one of the largest and most well-known festivals in Tokyo. It features multiple processions throughout its three days. Some of these are highly formal and follow established ceremonial patterns, while others are more physically expressive and community-driven. Participants carry *mikoshi*, portable shrines, through the streets of Asakusa, moving through different neighborhoods according to predetermined routes.[31] The atmosphere of the festival is energetic and at times quite intense. Consumption of alcohol, dancing, gambling, and sex work have historically been associated with the celebration.[32] These elements coexist with formal ritual observances conducted at the Asakusa shrine and Sensō-ji temple.

The festival attracts visitors from across Japan as well as many international travelers. Due to its placement shortly after Golden Week, a national holiday period marked by high travel and spending, Sanja Matsuri contributes to continued economic activity in the Asakusa area.[33] Street vendors line the temple approach and surrounding streets, and temporary food stalls are set up throughout the grounds. As a result, the festival functions as a significant public gathering and increases economic activity in Tokyo.

Historically, Sanja Matsuri recalls the legend of the Hinokuma brothers, Takenari and Hamanari, who, according to legend, discovered a small golden statue of *Kannon Bodhisattva* (known in Sanskrit as Avalokiteśvara) in the Sumida River around 628 CE. After this discovery, the head of the village, Haji no Nakatomo, recognized the statue's

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[31] Lucas, "Script and Score," 81–96.
[32] Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan*, 104–9.
[33] Garcia Chambers, "Japan's Golden Week Holidays: A 'Golden' Timing," *Department of Global Studies* 6 (March 2014): 1–7.

significance and converted his residence into a temple to enshrine it.[34] This structure developed into what is now Sensō-ji, making it one of the oldest temples in Tokyo.

The statue of Kannon, measuring approximately 20 centimeters, is not publicly displayed. It is considered a *hibutsu*, a hidden Buddha image, following a broader Japanese tradition in which certain sacred objects are kept from public view.[35] Sensō-ji was historically affiliated with the *Tendai* sect of Buddhism, and in 1950, it became the head temple of the *Shōkannon* sect, though it continues to follow the same Mahayana practices as Tendai.[36] This institutional shift did not change the temple's central focus on devotion to Kannon, that continues to be venerated as a figure of compassion and protection within the community.

Sensō-ji Temple

The Shintō shrine, Asakusa-jinja, was integrated with Sensō-ji Temple until the Meiji period, during which it functioned within a shared religious complex. After the Meiji government's policy of enforcing the separation of Shintō and Buddhism, the institutional relationship between the shrine and temple was formally divided.[37] As a result, the festival became centered at Asakusa-jinja rather than Sensō-ji Temple. This historical separation shaped the administrative and ritual distinction that exists today, while the spatial proximity of the two sites continues to define the layout of the festival grounds and contributes to the synchronicity of the religions. Housed within the temple's

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[34] Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan*, 5; Lucas, "Script and Score," 81.
[35] Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan*, 10.
[36] Yoshio Imaizumi, *Nihon bukkyō shi jiten (Dictionary of Japanese Buddhist History)* (Tōkyō: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1999), 601; Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan*, 79.
[37] This is commonly known as shinbutsu bunri. See Klaus Antoni, "The 'Separation of Gods and Buddhas' at Ōmiwa Jinja in Meiji Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22, no. 1 (1995): 139.

various structures is a nationally recognized copy of the *Lotus Sutra*, the original edition of *Issaikyō* — a comprehensive collection of Buddhist texts — and a statue of Kannon sculpted by the Tendai monk Ennin.[38] These objects contribute to the temple's historical and doctrinal significance within Japanese Buddhism.

Sensō-ji's grounds begin at the *Kaminarimon* gate, which serves as the outer entrance to the temple complex.[39] The gate is flanked by statues of *Fujin*, the wind kami, and *Raijin*, the thunder kami, who are positioned as protective figures.[40] A large red lantern hangs in the center of the gate. It is one of the most recognizable architectural features of the site. Beyond Kaminarimon is the *Nakamise-dori,* a shopping street. Souvenirs and traditional goods are sold along both sides of this approach. Historically, this corridor served as a supply depot for those who passed through Senso-ji on pilgrimages. The street functions as a transitional space between the outer entrance and the inner temple grounds. Visitors will most likely move through a commercial corridor before arriving at the central architecture.

At the end of Nakamise-dori stands the *Hōzōmon* Gate. This gate houses some national treasures, including the *Lotus Sutra*.[41] Passing through Hōzōmon leads to the main courtyard area. To the left of the gate sits the Five-Storied Pagoda, which houses Buddha's ashes, a gift from the royal temple[42] in Sri Lanka.

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[38] Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan*, 10. See also Sensō-ji Temple, "Sensō-ji," accessed November 10, 2025; Imaizumi, *Nihon bukkyō shi jiten,* 601.
[39] This gate is an iconic attraction in Tokyo and sits in front of one of the busiest intersections in Asakusa.
[40] Kami, the deities of Shinto, come in many forms. Many are seen as protectors while others serve as tricksters or malevolent beings.
[41] Imaizumi, *Nihon bukkyō shi jiten*.
[42] Sensō-ji Temple, "五重塔"

Finally, the *Kannondō* Hall sits at the center of the complex. This hall enshrines the hidden statue of Kannon and serves as the primary site of prayer and ritual. Visitors approach the hall and may offer incense at the large bronze burner positioned in front of the structure, purchase *omamori* — amulets often found at temples and used for protection, luck, and various other blessings depending on the need, and wash their hands before entering the main Kannondō Hall. The hall serves as the focal point of devotion within the temple grounds and anchors the broader feng shui of gates, the pagoda, and subsidiary structures.

Festival Elements

In 2025, Sanja Matsuri formally began on the evening of May 15th with the *Honsha Mikoshi Mitamire Nogi*, a ceremony in which the sacred spirit of Asakusa Shrine is transferred into the main portable shrines. On May 16th, the festival continued with the *Daigyoretsu* or "Grand Parade." This procession included members of the *Ohayashi yatai*, geisha affiliated with the Tokyo Asakusa Association, *Tobi cho Kiyari* performers, *Binzasara* dancers, and *Shirasagi* dancers, all dressed in historical costumes themed around the founding of Sensō-ji.[43] The parade began near Sensō-ji Temple and moved along Nakamise-dori and through surrounding streets before arriving at Asakusa Shrine. Later that afternoon, the Binzasara Dance was formally dedicated on the shrine grounds.

Saturday centered on the annual Festival Ceremony held in the morning. In the afternoon, the *Chonai Mikoshi Rengou Togyo*, a joint neighborhood procession of portable shrines, began. Around one hundred portable shrines from 44 neighboring towns

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[43] Gerald Groemer, "Binzasara: Music and Dance at Sensōji in Edo/Tōkyō," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 43 (2011): 37–61; Lucas, "Script and Score," 82.

gathered behind the main hall of Sensō-ji Temple before departing one by one, in the pouring rain. After receiving purification at Asakusa Shrine, they were carried back to their respective neighborhoods.

On Sunday morning, the festival's main event, the *Honsha Mikoshi Kakuchou Togyo* — a procession of the main shrine's mikoshi — took place. The three main mikoshi departed from Asakusa Shrine at approximately 6:00 AM and traveled along three separate routes through the surrounding neighborhoods. After completing their routes, they returned to Asakusa Shrine in the early evening. That evening concluded with the Honsha Mikoshi Mitama Gaeshinoki, the ceremony in which the divine spirit was returned from the portable shrines back to the main hall. Throughout the festival, certain streets in Asakusa were closed to traffic.

Mikoshi

Mikoshi are portable, sacred shrines, similar to a palanquin, and are often paraded during festivals and other important Japanese events. They are constructed with a wooden frame, lacquered surfaces, metal fittings, rope, and decorative elements such as gold leaf and copper, along with carved figures such as a phoenix at the top, hanging bells, and additional figures inside. Two to four long wooden beams extend from the base, allowing participants to lift and carry the structure on their shoulders.[44] Despite their visual opulence, mikoshi are built to withstand significant movement and physical strain during processions.

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[44] For detailed photographs and illustrations of mikoshi, see Lucas, "Script and Score," 82, 88.

Inside each mikoshi sits an enshrined kami. During a festival, a mikoshi functions as a temporary vehicle for the deity, allowing the kami to leave the shrine and travel throughout the surrounding community. Participants lift, shake, and sway the mikoshi while chanting and dancing, making for a highly physical display of devotion.[45] Participants shake the kami's energy out of the mikoshi to spread around the surrounding area in celebration.

At Sanja Matsuri, three main mikoshi, which are larger than the rest, are heavily involved in the opening and closing ceremonies. These mikoshi enshrine the three founders of Sensō-ji, Haji no Nakatomo, Hinokuma Hamanari, and Hinokuma Takenari.[46] The three are collectively honored at Asakusa Shrine, and their mikoshi — each weighing around 1000 killograms respectively — are treated with particular reverence. On the final day of the festival, these three mikoshi are carried through the streets of Asakusa in large-scale processions before being returned to the shrine grounds.

In addition to the three principal mikoshi, many neighborhood mikoshi participate throughout the festival. These are organized by local districts and groups associated with Asakusa Shrine.[47] Each neighborhood and shrine organization is responsible for maintaining and carrying its own mikoshi, reinforcing local identity and collective participation. During fieldwork in 2025's Sanja Matsuri, several participants stated that the number of mikoshi present is generally above 80, or exactly 100, and that it may vary from year to year.

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[45] The purpose of tamafuri is to entertain or "energize" the kami enshrined within. The resulting energy is believed to spread around the surrounding area, bringing good fortune.
[46] Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan*, 5.
[47] Misumi, *"The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi,"* 64.

Carrying the mikoshi requires coordinated effort. Participants often wear *happi* coats that identify their neighborhood or group affiliation. The movement of the mikoshi is directed by leaders who determine routes; however, based on participant observation and preliminary research, many local participants are extremely familiar with the streets of Asakusa and move throughout with little issue or need for reference. At times, the mikoshi is lifted high and shaken or slapped vigorously, while in other moments it is set down for rest or repositioning. The physical intensity of carrying can be demanding on the body, requiring a constant rotation of holders in and out throughout the procession.

Mikoshi are virtually always flanked by musicians who accompany the procession. Common instruments heard during these movements include *taiko* drums, flutes, whistles, and *hyoshigi*, wooden clappers that are struck together, commonly seen in kabuki. These instruments create a steady tempo that guides participants. The rhythm helps coordinate movement, signal changes in pace, and maintain unity among those moving the mikoshi.[48] These sacred vehicles are key to connecting the festival's loose, public celebration with its deep-rooted historical and religious foundations.

On Organized Crime

Reports from the Tokyo newspaper Asahi Shimbun have noted the historical involvement of organized crime groups at Sanja Matsuri. The *Asakusa Takahashi-gumi* and *Nakamura-kai*, both affiliated with the *Sumiyoshi-kai*, were reported to use local mikoshi alliances in each town to gain public visibility. Earlier accounts described their presence as largely social, but later reports indicated that affiliated groups organized

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[48] I witnessed this firsthand. See also Sadler, "Carrying the Mikoshi," 92; Lucas, "Script and Score," 89–90.

clubs connected to mikoshi participation. A 2007 report stated that of the 30 clubs carrying mikoshi during Sanja Matsuri, approximately 70 percent were represented by gang members.[49] The festival was also described as a potential source of funding for such groups. During fieldwork in 2025 and observation in 2023, I noted only brief and socially oriented interactions involving individuals identifiable as affiliated with such groups. Their presence appeared limited to informal gatherings where tattoos were displayed freely. One participant stated that they appreciated Sanja Matsuri because it allowed them to socialize with friends who may be affiliated with the yakuza. My field observations reflect a more subdued presence in recent years.

Situating Sanja Matsuri in Scholarship

Urban shrine studies around Tokyo's festival culture situate Sanja Matsuri within extensive social and religious contexts.[50] Ethnographies of Asakusa and historical studies of shrine-centered life demonstrate how ritual performance, neighborhood organization, and local economies mutually influence one another. Nam-lin Hur's *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensō-ji and Edo Society* is especially important in this regard. Hur describes historical Sensō-ji as a space structured by a "prayer–play" dynamic in which devotion, entertainment, and commerce coexisted without a clear boundary.[51] This historical precedent complicates modern narratives that equate festivity with secularization; celebratory action has long been an aspect of devotional life rather than a deviation from it.

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[49] *Asahi Shimbun*. July 13, 2007.
[50] Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan*; Misumi, *"The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi."*
[51] Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan.*

Further, the *Nihon Bukkyō Shi Jiten* (Dictionary of Japanese Buddhist History) compiled by Imaizumi Yoshio serves as a reference point for clarifying specific Buddhist terminology, particularly regarding the Tendai sect and the resulting divergence into Shōkannon.[52] These terms are central to understanding Sensō-ji's institutional identity. The dictionary's entries on Tendai thought, and the unique positioning of Kannon within the sect, provide interpretive grounding for the religious vocabulary that surfaces in both historical sources and contemporary participant discourse. Drawing from Imaizumi's definitions creates an anchor for Sensō-ji's local articulations of belief (such as prayers to Kannon for prosperity, healing, or easy birth) in a broader Buddhist framework.

A. W. Sadler's 1972 article, "Carrying the Mikoshi: Further Field Notes on the Shrine Festival in Modern Tokyo," offers an early ethnographic portrait of Sanja Matsuri. Writing in the wake of postwar urban redevelopment, Sadler documents the ritual organization, neighborhoods, and the practice of mikoshi-carrying as both religious and civic performances.[53] His observations serve as supporting literature and provide some of the earliest photographic documentation of the festival. Along with Sadler, Ray Lucas's "Script and Score: Revisiting Nelson Goodman at Sanja Matsuri – Japan" functions as a similar support. However, what makes Lucas's chapter unique is the inclusion of paintings of the mikoshi and participants in festival attire, as well as detailed diagrams showing how the one-ton shrines are picked up and moved.[54] These sources are imperative for discussing intricate details of the processions and for comparing my own experiences with participant observation at the Sunday morning procession in 2025.

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[52] Imaizumi, *Nihon bukkyō shi jiten,* 601.
[53] Sadler, "Carrying the Mikoshi."
[54] Lucas, "Script and Score."

Lived Religion in Practice

Fieldwork conducted during Sanja Matsuri in 2023 and 2025 produced a combination of observational data, participant experience, and informal interviews with festival participants. Following the principles of RDA, these materials were interpreted as descriptive accounts and as expressions of how participants themselves articulate religious meaning within the festival environment.[55] Analysis of these materials reveals several recurring themes that illuminate how religious meaning is enacted and interpreted within the festival environment. Rather than emerging solely through formal shrine rituals or monastic vows, participants frequently described a spiritual intensity or a feeling of communal ease through physical exertion, collective movement, neighborhood participation, and various festival activities.

The following sections examine four central themes that emerged from the data: embodied participation in mikoshi processions, including participant observation; neighborhood identity and collective belonging; the presence of foreign participants within festival spaces; and the relationship between festive intensity and perceived sacredness. Together, these findings demonstrate how Sanja Matsuri functions not only as a cultural event but as a site where religious meaning is actively produced through lived experience.

[55] Alejandro, “Reflexive Discourse Analysis,” 152–153.

Physical Devotion

One of the most immediately recognizable aspects of participation in Sanja Matsuri is the intense physical engagement required to carry a mikoshi. During processions, participants support the approximately one-ton portable shrines on wooden beams placed across their shoulders as they move through the crowded streets of Asakusa. Carriers regularly rotate positions beneath the beams to distribute the physical strain among the group. These rotations allow participants to sustain the procession over long distances while maintaining rhythmic movement and tamafuri.

As part of the 2025 fieldwork, I participated directly in the Sunday morning procession for *Ninomiya*, the second of the three principal mikoshi associated with the festival.[56] This portable shrine, said to house the spirit of Hinokuma Hamanari, weighs approximately 1,000 kilograms. Access to the procession occurred through informal interactions with local participants the evening prior to the event. When my colleague and I returned the next morning, organizers provided us with happi coats and headbands, allowing us to temporarily join the group of carriers. Several interviewees had previously explained that foreign participation in mikoshi processions often requires established relationships with neighborhood groups, making this invitation an unexpected stride in participant observation. As a foreign researcher, I found that this inclusion and acceptance also highlighted the role that trust and informal social networks play in determining who is permitted to participate in mikoshi carrying. Many social media

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[56] 二之宮 in Japanese. This mikoshi, along with the *Sanomiya* (三之宮), associated with Hinokuma Takenari, is distinctive in that neither feature a phoenix finial.

influencers use Sanja Matsuri as an opportunity for content creation. Since this was not my intention, but rather genuine interest, I can infer that trust was built faster.

As the shrine was carried toward the gathering point, the sound of chanting and rhythmic clapping grew louder. Participants called out “wasshoi” in unison as the shrine was maneuvered into position.[57] At this point, the organizational logic of the procession became clear. Fluid lines formed along each of the four supporting beams, with participants cycling through positions beneath the shrine. Approximately five or six individuals could fit beneath each beam if standing closely together. Organizers directed the flow of carriers, pulling individuals from the front of each line to take a position beneath the beam while signaling others to step out when their turn was complete. This rotation system allowed the shrine to continue moving while distributing the physical strain among participants.

When my turn came, I crouched beneath the beam and placed my shoulder against the wood alongside the other carriers. The weight of the shrine was immediately apparent. Because the mikoshi is lifted and shaken, each downward motion sends a jolt through the beam as it settles back onto the shoulders of those supporting it. Even with multiple carriers sharing the load, the combined weight and rhythmic movement created significant physical pressure and later bruising. Participants adjusted constantly, shifting their footing and posture to maintain balance as the shrine moved forward. Some long-time mikoshi carriers had visible knots on their shoulders from years of tamafuri.

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[57] *Wasshoi* (わっしょい) – which functions more as a call for unity than a word – among other phrases such as *Soiya* (ソイヤ), help keep morale high and retain strength through collective chanting.

The experience of moving with the procession is difficult to convey through observation alone. One useful comparison is the energy of a concert "mosh pit," where densely packed participants move together in response to music and shared momentum.[58] Similarly, mikoshi carriers are surrounded by tightly packed bodies as the crowd moves collectively through the streets. Chants of "*wasshoi*" echoed around the shrine while flutes and drums provided a steady rhythm for the procession. Within this environment, individual movement became secondary to the group's momentum.

As the procession advanced through the streets of Asakusa, the surrounding crowd revealed the diverse social environment that characterizes Sanja Matsuri. Organizers, long-time neighborhood participants, police, tourists, and foreign observers all occupied the same public space, forming concentric layers around the moving shrine. Participation, therefore, extended beyond those directly carrying the mikoshi, encompassing a wider network of individuals who collectively sustained the festival atmosphere with their supportive celebration and chanting.

Over the course of the procession, I rotated beneath the shrine several times, each interval marked by intense physical exertion followed by brief moments of recovery within the surrounding crowd. The final stretch of the route culminated in the shrine being lowered to the ground, accompanied by a synchronized series of claps from participants and spectators alike. Although physically exhausting, the experience highlighted the extent to which mikoshi-carrying relies on coordinated collective effort.

[58] This collective movement and density of bodies is explored in the *Illuminated Mangascript* through panel composition and visual crowding of elements.

Carriers operate as part of a collective body responsible for sustaining the shrine's movement.

Experiencing the procession from within this collective structure clarified why so many interviewees described carrying the mikoshi as the festival's emotional and spiritual center. The act of physically supporting and moving the shrine through the streets creates a form of embodied participation that connects individuals not only to one another but also to the spiritual presence associated with the mikoshi itself.

Participants repeatedly described the act of carrying the mikoshi as the central experience of the festival. When asked about their favorite aspect of Sanja Matsuri, most interviewees immediately cited the mikoshi itself. Responses included statements such as an energetic "Of course, the mikoshi!" "I like decorating the mikoshi," and simply "I like the mikoshi." These answers suggest that the physical act of carrying and engaging with a portable shrine serves as the primary point of connection between participants and the festival.

A particularly distinctive element of these processions is tamafuri. Participants explained that this motion is intended to energize the spirit housed within the shrine as it moves through the surrounding neighborhoods. Through the shrine's repeated shaking and rhythmic movement, the kami is energized, and that energy is released, circulating throughout the surrounding community. The combined elements of chanting, coordinated movement, and physical exertion create an atmosphere in which participants experience both exhaustion and heightened excitement through collective effort.

Viewed through the framework of lived religion, these forms of embodied participation demonstrate how religious meaning emerges through physical and social practice. Participants encounter the kami through shared bodily exertion, coordinated movement, and the procession's emotional intensity.[59] In contrast, other visitors find value in participation and socializing.[60] The act of carrying the mikoshi transforms the streets of Asakusa into a temporary ritual space where spiritual presence is experienced collectively through participation.

Identity and Belonging

Beyond the physical act of carrying mikoshi, Sanja Matsuri also reinforces strong forms of neighborhood identity and communal belonging. Many participants emphasized the role of local groups and committees in organizing mikoshi routes and coordinating participation. Some interviewees described how decisions regarding procession direction and scheduling are made collectively within neighborhood groups, while others emphasized the importance of local leadership in guiding the event.

Participants frequently described the festival as both a community obligation and a personal passion. One interviewee noted that without the commitment associated with the festival, “a lot of people wouldn’t be here,” showing how Sanja Matsuri functions as a focal point for community gathering and participation. In this sense, the festival reinforces relationships among residents and provides an annual moment in which neighborhood identity becomes publicly visible.

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[59] McGuire, *Lived Religion*,12–13; Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices* (New York: NYU Press, 2021), 5–6.

[60] Sitting close behind cultural importance, many responses collected from Sanja Matsuri in 2025 focused on the socialization that happens during the festival. I.e. spending time with family and friends.

Several comments also emphasized the importance of generational continuity. One foreign participant explained that what impressed them most about the festival was the visible presence of both older and younger participants:

> There's the old generation and the new generation, and that's so important. For me, I have only one day off from work [during the festival], and on that day I always do matsuri.

This sense of continuity is also reflected in the presence of children's mikoshi, small shrines that allow younger participants to take part in festival activities while learning the traditions associated with the event.[61] Through these practices, Sanja Matsuri functions as a mechanism for transmitting local identity, cultural values, and communal relationships across generations. Participation in the festival therefore reinforces spiritual meaning as well as a shared sense of belonging amongst both long-term residents and newer participants.

Tourism and Foreign Participation

The presence of foreign visitors and participants has become an increasingly common feature of Sanja Matsuri. Interviews conducted during the festival revealed generally positive attitudes toward foreign participation in mikoshi processions. As a foreign researcher in this environment, these responses also shaped how I interpreted my own presence within the festival space. When asked how they felt about foreigners carrying mikoshi, seven of the eight individuals who addressed the question expressed supportive views. Comments included statements such as "I think it's a very good thing,"

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[61] From discussion with participants in 2025, this is a relatively recent development that started in 2024.

"It's nice to have a place that a foreigner can carry mikoshi," and "Foreigners are rooting for Japan's traditions."

Several participants emphasized that allowing foreigners to carry the mikoshi helps introduce Japanese cultural traditions to a broader audience. One individual explained that the festival offers visitors an opportunity to actively participate by wearing traditional festival clothing and joining the procession. Others appeared surprised by the question itself, with one participant responding, "Are tourists not allowed to carry the mikoshi?" This reaction suggests that, for some participants, foreign involvement has become a normal and accepted aspect of the contemporary festival environment.

At the same time, a small degree of ambivalence was also expressed. One interviewee stated that while watching the mikoshi was acceptable for visitors, direct participation was not.[62] This response suggests that, depending on the neighborhood association or group organizing the procession, participation in mikoshi-carrying can also serve as a cultural boundary, distinguishing local ownership from external engagement.

Despite these occasional reservations, the overwhelming tone of the interviews suggests that many participants view foreign involvement as a form of cultural appreciation rather than blatant intrusion. This dynamic illustrates how religious traditions can expand beyond their original communities while still maintaining local meaning and authority. Foreign participation, therefore, becomes part of an ongoing

[62] Another sensitive factor which may contribute to the presence of more foreign festival participants is the decline of the Japanese birthrate, which has affected many factors in the country. See Manabu Akagawa, "A Natural History Model of Low Birth Rate Issues in Japan since the 1990s," *The American Sociologist* 50, no. 2 (2019): 300–314.

negotiation between cultural openness and the preservation of communal identity within the festival atmosphere.

Sacred vs Festive

One of the most striking features of Sanja Matsuri is the intense festive atmosphere that surrounds mikoshi processions. Loud chanting, music, dancing, food vendors, and widespread alcohol consumption contribute to an environment that can appear chaotic and purely celebratory to outside observers. Participants were asked to reflect on whether the festival's meaning has changed over time, particularly in relation to these festive elements.

Some interviewees acknowledged that the festival's character has shifted. One participant remarked that in earlier periods, festivals were associated more directly with prayers for health, rain, and agricultural success,[63] whereas today, "-now it's a bit of a party. -people are just having fun." This perspective supports eventization theory.[64] Where contemporary religion-based festivals continue to shift toward secularized public events. However, other participants strongly emphasized continuity in the festival's meaning.

Several interviewees insisted that the significance of Sanja Matsuri "has not changed," even in the face of historical developments and recent disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.[65] One participant explained that because the festival has been maintained for generations, "the meaning of the festival doesn't change." The responses

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[63] Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan,* 33–39.
[64] Misumi, "The Cultural Politics of Shouldering Mikoshi," 65–66.
[65] During the COVID-19 pandemic and into 2022, Sanja Matsuri and accompanying events were canceled. In 2023, restrictions were lifted and the festival was able to be continued.

were nearly evenly divided between those emphasizing change and those emphasizing continuity, suggesting that Sanja Matsuri simultaneously operates as both celebration and ritual practice.

Viewed through the perspective of lived religion, the intensity and unorthodox nature of the festival do not necessarily diminish its religious significance. Instead, practices such as drinking, dancing, and energetic tamafuri can function as expressions of communal devotion that generate emotional intensity and reinforce collective participation while retaining longstanding traditions. I argue that the festive atmosphere of Sanja Matsuri therefore demonstrates how religious experience may be expressed through celebration, physical exertion, and shared activity within public space.[66] While this research focuses specifically on Sanja Matsuri, the findings suggest that similar dynamics may be present in other religion-based festivals where ritual practice and collective celebration intersect.

Spirituality and Celebration

The above findings reveal a complex interplay between ritual practice, community participation, and festive celebration within Sanja Matsuri. The ethnographic data suggests that a binary distinction between prayer and play does not adequately capture how participants experience the event. On the contrary, Sanja Matsuri operates simultaneously as a site of religious practice, tradition preservation, community gathering, and public celebration.[67] By bringing together historical context, lived religion

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[66] McGuire, *Lived Religion*,12–13; Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion*, 5–6.
[67] McGuire, *Lived Religion*; Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion*; Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan.*

theory, and participant perspectives, I demonstrate that the festival's meaning emerges through the interaction of institutional ritual structures, embodied participation, and the dynamic social environment that surrounds participants.

Sanja Matsuri is frequently described through contrasting interpretations. From one perspective, it appears as a series of religious rituals rooted in the traditions of Asakusa Shrine and the veneration of the three founders associated with the festival's origin. From another perspective, the intense atmosphere of celebration can lead observers to interpret the event primarily as a cultural spectacle or public entertainment.

These ethnographic findings suggest that participants themselves do not necessarily experience this distinction as contradictory. Interviews revealed that many individuals understand the festival as both meaningful and enjoyable, combining religious significance with communal celebration. Festival-goers frequently described the celebratory elements as part of the experience through which its meaning is expressed.

Resolving Tension

The framework of lived religion helps clarify why the distinction between ritual and celebration becomes more malleable within the context of Sanja Matsuri. Rather than focusing solely on formal doctrine or institutional ritual authority, lived religion emphasizes how spiritual meaning emerges through everyday practices, embodied experiences, and social interaction.

The findings presented in this study illustrate this dynamic clearly. Drawing on Reflexive Discourse Analysis, I interpret participant interviews and observational data as expressions of how individuals articulate religious meaning within the social environment

of the festival.[68] The physical act of carrying the mikoshi, the collective coordination required while simultaneously consuming alcohol, and the shared emotional intensity of the festival all function as forms of embodied religious engagement. These practices allow participants to experience the presence of the kami or Kannon through participation in the broader festival environment. In this sense, the festival's celebratory atmosphere becomes one of the primary ways in which religious meaning is enacted and experienced within the community in Asakusa.

Foreign Participation

The rising presence of foreign participants introduces another layer to this dynamic. Interview responses revealed largely positive attitudes toward foreign involvement in mikoshi carrying, with many participants viewing this participation as a sign of respect and intrigue for Japanese cultural traditions. As a foreign researcher who participated in a procession, these perspectives also shaped how I interpreted my own inclusion within the festival environment. At the same time, occasional reservations suggest that participation can also function as a boundary marking cultural ownership.

These dynamics illustrate how Sanja Matsuri's traditions adapt to changing social environments. The festival remains rooted in neighborhood organization and local identity while simultaneously expanding to include new participants. This negotiation between openness and preservation reflects the broader ways in which religious traditions evolve within the contemporary urban setting.

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[68] Alejandro, "Reflexive Discourse Analysis," 152–153; McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 13–16.

Redefining Religion

The findings of this research challenge narrow institutional definitions of religion that prioritize formal doctrine, official ritual, or clerical authority. At Sanja Matsuri, participants frequently expressed religious meaning through physical participation and communal engagement, even when these activities occurred outside the direct authority of Shintō or Buddhist institutions.

These forms of participation demonstrate how spiritual meaning can emerge through shared experience and embodied practice. Sanja Matsuri serves as an excellent case for showing how religious traditions may persist not only through formal institutions, but also through the lived actions of communities who sustain them informally in public space.

Looking Forward

In this study, I've argued that the intensity, disorder, and festivity of Sanja Matsuri are central mechanisms through which religious meaning is enacted and experienced. By examining the festival through the lens of lived religion, it becomes clear that spiritual expression is not confined to formal ritual structures or institutional authority.

The findings demonstrate that Sanja Matsuri operates as a dynamic space where tradition is continuously negotiated. Practices of sacralization, participant engagement, and even moments of "excess" celebration work together to sustain religious meaning across generations and social boundaries. The festival reveals how contemporary religious life can be both deeply rooted in tradition and responsive to changing social conditions. The accompanying Illuminated Mangascript extends this argument beyond

the written academic form, offering an alternative mode of engagement for that reflects the same principles of lived religion through visual narrative.

More broadly, this research suggests that festivals like Sanja Matsuri challenge narrow definitions of religion that separate devotion from certain forms of festivity. By recognizing the role of embodiment, emotion, and community participation, we gain a more nuanced understanding of how religious meaning is lived, transmitted, and negotiated in various public spaces.

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Appendix A

Illuminating Sanja Matsuri

The following pages present the second component of this thesis, the *Illuminated Mangascript*. Drawing from both European illuminated manuscripts and Japanese manga, this work serves as a companion piece designed for a general audience. The manuscript is intended for readers aged twelve and above and is presented in both English and Japanese. Informed by interviews and participant observation, *Illuminating Sanja Matsuri* reflects a translation of ethnographic notes and sketches into a visual narrative form. Through this work, I aim to communicate key themes explored in the written portion of this thesis in a way that does not require an academic background or travel to Japan. What follows are fourteen hand-made scenes of *Illuminating Sanja Matsuri.*