

HAND PAPERMAKING



The Echizen Washi Deity and Paper Festival

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When I was a kid, I didn't think that the festival was anything special, because it was just there. I thought that all festivals in Japan were like that. But when I came back to Fukui after working in Tokyo for a while, I realized just how wonderful it really is.

—YOSHINAO SUGIHARA, DEALER OF ECHIZEN WASHI



Having been retrieved from the mountain-top shrine, the goddess is ushered back into the village inside her mikoshi, May 2007. All photos by and courtesy of the author.

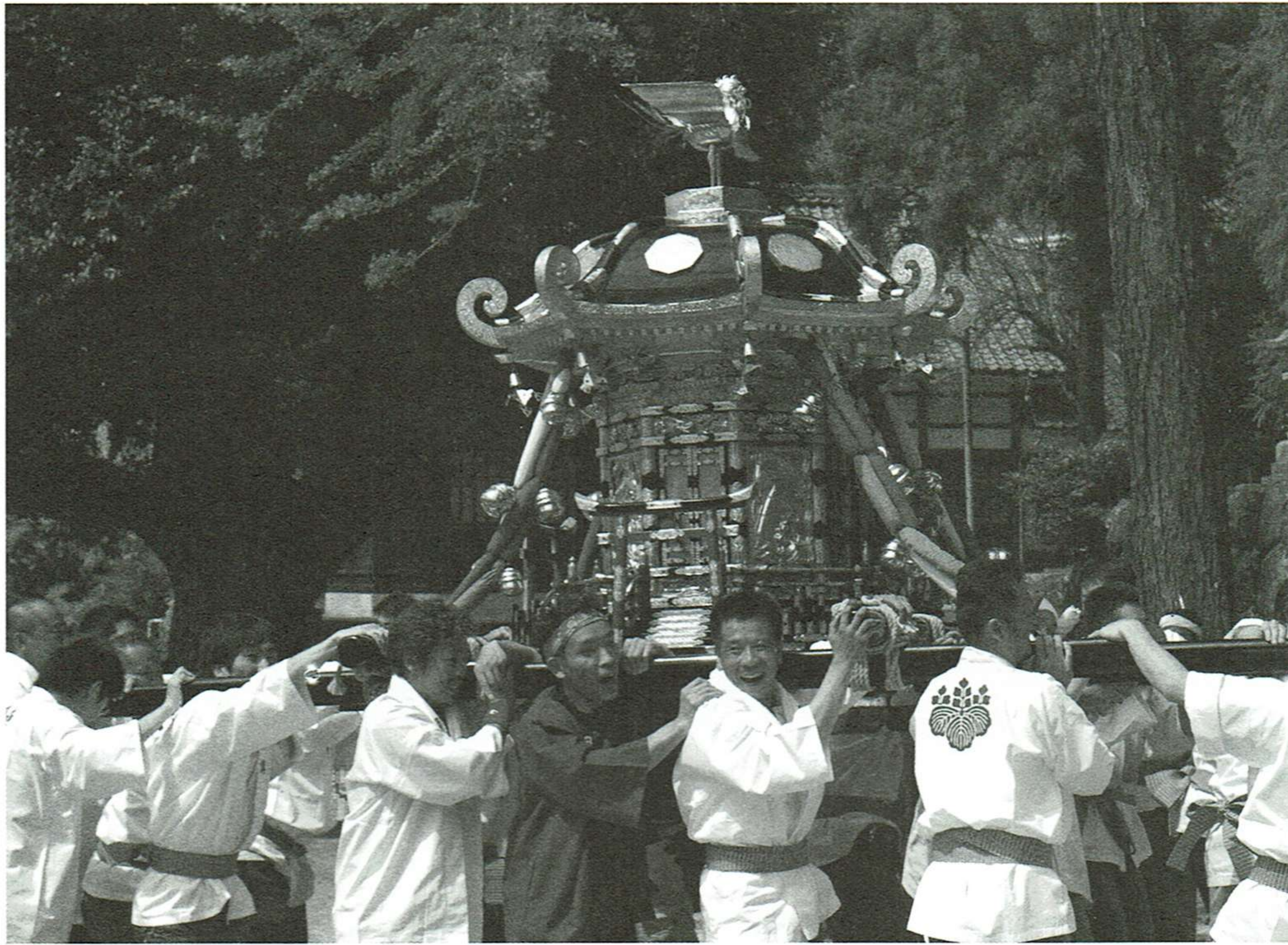
A *matsuri* is a Japanese celebratory festival, most predominantly held around harvest time, but occurring throughout the year depending on the locale. *Matsuri* have been practiced for nearly two millennia, growing out of simpler Shinto rites intended to ensure peace, purity, and prosperity for communities and their lands. Even in modern Japan, *matsuri*—no matter how far they have diverged from their origins—continue to be extremely popular events. Each *matsuri* carries the unique stamp of the community that created it. In urban centers, there tends to be a secularized aspect to many modern *matsuri*, but those in rural areas retain more of their spiritual roots.

The *mikoshi* is the centerpiece of the *matsuri*. This portable and usually elaborately decorated shrine is generally thought to be temporarily inhabited by the local deity for the duration of the festival. In some cases, an effigy is placed inside the *mikoshi*, giving the deity a form to occupy for the period of the ceremonies. The *mikoshi* is paraded through the streets on the shoulders of the local people. At many *matsuri*, the *mikoshi* is repeatedly and sharply agitated up and down, with the bearers moving in unison. The bells and chimes of the *mikoshi* mix with the exuberant shouts of the participants, creating an elaborate cacophony. The commotion that this jumping produces is intended to engage the deity and entreat the bestowment of good fortune upon the attendants.

The Echizen washi area is located some thirty kilometers from the Japan Sea coast, not far from the center of Fukui prefecture,

and about a hundred kilometers north-northeast of Kyoto. Rather confusingly, the area goes by many names. Originally made up of five small local papermaking areas known collectively as Goka-mura (“five villages”), the district lies at the eastern-most end of a small plain, nestled against a string of low mountains. In 2005, the town of Imadate (including Goka-mura) was incorporated into the larger city of Echizen. The Echizen area has long been well known for ceramics, knives, fabric, and lacquerware, but perhaps most notably for papermaking. One of the few remaining places in Japan where one can still find a large percentage of the population focused on papermaking, the village is currently home to more than 300 craftspeople working in nearly 50 studios, including 35 individuals who are recognized by the prefecture, and one Living National Treasure. It is also home to the Kami To Kami No Matsuri.

Kami is one of many homonyms in Japanese; it can mean both paper and deity (or god). This deity and paper festival celebrates the goddess Kawakami Gozen, the only recognized papermaking deity in Japan. The *matsuri* honors the goddess for introducing the art of papermaking to the local farmers. While there are other *matsuri* that incorporate paper in a significant way (most notably the Nebuta Matsuri in Aomori, and the Kanto Matsuri in Akita), this is the only festival specifically dedicated to Kawakami Gozen, and to my knowledge, the only one to revere the act of papermaking itself.



Bearers run with the mikoshi in the open square at one of the shrines along the route, May 2010.

The short main street at the heart of the Echizen washi area is nicknamed Japanese Paper Plaza, with the Papyrus House at one end, where visitors can try their hand at papermaking, and the Paper and Culture Museum at the other, where in the annex there is a permanent display of many hundreds of different papers, all of which are made locally. In the middle is the Udatsu Paper and Craft Museum, where technical displays and workshops are given. Paper shops and a café line the street. At the end of a fifteen-minute walk down twisting, narrow streets, nestled against Mt. Omine (also known as Mt. Gongen), is Okamoto-Otaki shrine.

Although the current buildings were erected in 1843, the original shrine was built in the seventh century. A mixed shrine-temple enshrining Kawakami Gozen was established at the site in 719. During the middle ages, there was a thriving temple complex on the mountain, with 48 buildings and over 700 monks; the complex was razed in the sixteenth century. The current buildings were collectively recognized as an Important National Treasure in 1984.

The exact origins of the festival are indefinite. There are historical documents that state that the festival was already taking place in the early eighth century. Regardless of the actual date, the festival's organizers and participants are justifiably proud of its extremely long history, and see themselves as the bearers of this tradition for the coming generations.

The festival's current role is primarily to celebrate the goddess and her gift, and to cement reverence for her, but it also serves other intangible benefits such as community building. The locals suggest that the festival is essential to the area. Attendants remarked, "The festival is the core of Imadate, and the origin of the spirit that infuses all Echizen washi," and "I'm making paper today because the goddess allows me to do so. Everyone in Echizen waits for the festival, as it is so important to the development and prosperity of the village." Another papermaker told me, "It supports our mental strength. The festival itself doesn't help to sell paper directly, but somehow I receive energy through the festival." It also serves to remind individual papermakers of their place in the greater unit of Echizen washi, and in the long history of Japanese papermaking. "The festival deepens my feelings of gratitude toward my predecessors for passing on this gift which allows me to support myself."

In the early afternoon of the first day of the three-day festival, the sound of drumming can be heard around the village, as a small procession winds its way through the streets. The reverberating sound of the drum serves to call not only the community members, but also the deity herself. Once gathered at the shrine, the men take up the *mikoshi* on their shoulders and, with other participants trailing them in procession, begin the ascent to the smaller shrine at the top of the mountain behind the village. The goddess is removed from the upper shrine and installed in the *mikoshi*,



Participants rest and socialize at one of the many rest areas along the route of the procession, May 2007.



The climactic battle at the last stop reaches a fever pitch, May 2009.

after which she is brought back down to the town. For the last 200 meters or so, the *mikoshi* is carried at a full sprint, down the slope towards the courtyard of the shrine, through the cheering, waiting crowd, and up the long, stone staircase into the shrine precincts.

The second day is devoted to a number of ceremonies at the shrine. In perhaps the most impressive of these, a young girl chosen from the village represents the goddess, and a group of young boys play the role of farmers. As one of the local papermakers sings a traditional papermaking song, the goddess shows the farmers how to make paper and the farmers echo her actions. Part of the song makes reference to the fact that parents, children, and grandchildren are all engaged in papermaking. This ceremony in particular brings to mind the fact that this festival is passed on from generation to generation in a way similar to the craft of papermaking. In his youth, the papermaker now singing the song once played the role of the farmer, and one of these children will likely one day be the one singing the song.

On the third day, there is the procession through the village, which in some sense is the main event, certainly the most dynamic part of the festival. The *mikoshi* is carried throughout the streets, on a winding route that makes its way through most parts of the village. The parade consists of the drummers, followed by the *mikoshi* itself, and backed up by the reserves, a crowd of nearly a hundred. Along the way, fresh shoulders are rotated in and under the *mikoshi*; generally an individual only carries the *mikoshi* for

five minutes or so before rotating out. Even still, the procession stops to rest at least a dozen times, during which people laugh and talk, eat and drink. At each stop, sake, beer, and tea are liberally partaken.

Among these rest breaks, there are five main stops that occur at smaller neighborhood shrines. Each of these has a large, open courtyard. After a short rest, the call is made for the men who are local to this neighborhood to come and take up the *mikoshi*. They run with the *mikoshi* in a large circle around the courtyard. After they have gone round a few times, suddenly, the men from other neighborhoods will set upon the bearers, trying to force the *mikoshi* back out onto the route towards the next stop. The bearers want the goddess to remain in their own neighborhood, and so try to maintain a path that will keep them in the courtyard, but those from other areas are anxious for the goddess's presence in their own neighborhood, and so endeavor to force her back onto the route. It usually takes a few skirmishes before the non-locals succeed. These clashes start out rather lighthearted, but as the day wears on (and the effect of the sake sets in) these conflicts become more impassioned.

The final battle at the largest shrine on the route is no doubt better seen than described. By this time, some three to four hours into the event, inhibitions and reservations give way under the influence of the raucous atmosphere and alcohol to unfeigned vigor and intensity. As the participants rest before the final contest,



The mikoshi crests the stairs and descends back out into the street after the final, climactic battle, May 2010.

there is a building sense of anticipation, a palpable energy in the air. The drumming and other commotion reach a peak until the call is made for the locals to take up the *mikoshi*. The locals carry the mikoshi in a broad circle around the open square, stopping on occasion, not to rest, but rather to stimulate the goddess within the *mikoshi* by hoisting it up and down. The other members of the larger community stand around the outside of the square and exhort the locals. Again they run in circles and the tension mounts. Very few of the three hundred or so gathered are unaware of what is coming, but a great roar rises up all the same as the non-locals swarm suddenly toward the *mikoshi* as it is rounding towards the staircase descending back to the street, and more locals join ranks to bolster the *mikoshi*. The *mikoshi* teeters at the top of the stairs; everyone holds their collective breath as it looks certain to crest the stairs and spill down onto the street, but suddenly the *mikoshi* lurches back to life in the opposite direction. The non-locals cede, for now, and a great cry rises up from the crowd as the *mikoshi* arcs out back into the open square for another go-around.

Once the *mikoshi* is directed onto the street, it is taken back to Okamoto-Otaki shrine. Later, just before dusk, the procession begins back up the mountain, where the goddess is returned to the upper shrine. As the empty *mikoshi* is carried back down the twisting mountain path with only the light of lanterns, the men sing something akin to a slow dirge, lamenting that they have parted with the goddess. The atmosphere, with paper lanterns bobbing in the darkness, is deeply moving.

I mentioned to one of the organizers that it was remarkable that no one ever gets injured; there are plenty of close calls, and a few scrapes, but never (in recent memory, at least) anything serious. He replied matter-of-factly, "We are doing the work of the goddess, so she protects us."

While many of the locals I have spoken to are eager for the festival to embrace a wider audience, there are those who express hesitancy. The consensus seems to be that participants of any stripe are welcome, so long as in their heart they carry an understanding and respect for this small community's long-standing tradition and its attendant deity.

Author's note: Research for this article was mainly conducted over multiple visits to the Echizen washi area, including participation in the festival on four occasions over the last ten years. I deeply appreciate the warm welcome that has been afforded me there on every occasion, and the willingness of locals to introduce me to their treasure of a festival. For much of the historical information, the publication Kami to Kami no Sato (published locally, by the festival's executive committee in 2009) was extremely helpful. I am also grateful to Iwano Ichibei, Yanase Haruo, Aoki Rina, and Sugihara Yoshinao, for allowing me to quote them for this article.