Tradition of Two Yamahoko Float Processions to Be Revived at the Kyoto Gion Festival
—After Half a Century—Sakimatsuri (the first festival) and Atomatsuri (the later festival)

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The basic tradition common to all Japanese festivals involves worshipping the gods, appeasing them, and then seeing them off when the festival is over. Thus, the rituals of greeting the gods and then seeing them off are central. These two ceremonies are marked by processions of portable shrines (mikoshi, or palanquins), in which the gods have been installed. The portable shrines belonging to a given Shinto house of worship are first taken out and circulated among the shrine parishioners, and then brought to a predetermined location where they are lodged for the duration of the festival. They are then brought back to the main shrine. The ritual surrounding the procession to the predetermined lodging place for the portable shrines is called the shinkōsai (procession of the gods), and the procession back to the main shrine is called the kankōsai (return procession).

The Gion festival of Yasaka shrine is fundamentally the same. Under the traditional Japanese calendar, the opening procession would take place on the seventh day of the sixth month. Under the new calendar, it takes place on July 17. The return procession takes place on July 24 (or the fourth day of the sixth month under the old calendar). The gorgeous yamahoko floats, constructed with the finest festival arts craftsmanship, precede the portable shrines in the procession, in a custom stretching back perhaps as long as 850 years that has given them this established position in the procession at the Gion festival. The yamahoko float procession that accompanies the opening of the festival is called the sakimatsuri, and the return procession is called the atomatsuri. Thus, originally there were two yamahoko float processions every year.

The portable shrines are an offering made chiefly by the Shinto houses of worship, but the festival art of the yamahoko float procession came together as a result of shrine parishioners in the old Shimogoyō area of Kyoto (the central portion of the city) contributing their ideas. The yamahoko are their offering. The creation of the yamahoko floats for the sakimatsuri procession were the responsibility of the residents living to the south of Nishiki Kōji street, while the yamahoko for the atomatsuri procession were the responsibility of those living to the north.

The routes of the sakimatsuri and atomatsuri processions also differed. The route of the sakimatsuri yamahoko float procession ran eastward along Shijō street, then southward along Teramachi street. It then turned west along Matsubara street, and returned to the city. The route of the atomatsuri yamahoko float procession ran eastward along Sanjō street then southward along Teramachi street, returning to the city westward along Shijō street. Both routes passed to the Kamo river, circling to the right.

During the period of Japan's rapid economic growth, discussion began as to whether the route of the procession should be altered, while the sakimatsuri and atomatsuri processions might be combined. The goal would be to help foster and administer tourism more effectively, and to relieve traffic congestion in the age of the automobile. As a result, in 1956 the route of the sakimatsuri procession was first changed. It now ran northward up Teramachi street from Shijō street, and then westward along Oike street to return to the city. The route changed once more in 1961, following a course heading north up Kawaramachi street from Teramachi street. In this period, the route of the atomatsuri procession continued along its traditional path, but in 1966 it was combined with the sakimatsuri procession. And on July 17 the atomatsuri procession followed the sakimatsuri procession. This is how things have been up until the present day.

After almost half a century, there are now plans in place to revive the traditional atomatsuri procession, starting with the 2014 procession, and the two ancient processions will begin again.
The Procession Route in old times

A yamahoko float getting turned at the corner of Teramachi and Matsubara streets
(1919, Teramachi-Matsubara).
Tsuki Hoko, a famous float, attempts to turn from Teramachi street onto Matsubara street. Although not pictured, the local Teramachi police station was on the corner of Teramachi and Matsubara, a triangular structure that was removed the very day of the procession. Even so, turning the yamahoko is difficult and can often take 20 or 30 minutes.

The well-known float Jōmyō Yama parades down Sanjō street
(July 1905, the Eastern district of Sanjō-Takakura).
The Bank of Japan can be seen under construction in the background (the current annex to The Museum of Kyoto). The atomatsuri procession went from Karasuma street eastward down Sanjō street, turned south at the corner of Sanjō and Teramachi streets, and then westward at Shijō-Teramachi for the return to the city.

Otabisho, the lodging place for the sacred shrines on Shijō street prior to its widening (1911, Shijō-Teramachi).
Shijō street prior to its being widened. Looking east on Shijō from eastern Teramachi street. The building with the cypress bark roof in the foreground is the northern lodging place. The southern lodging place is to the right of the photograph, visible in the shadow of the building where the business is located. Today, both can be attended on the south side of Shijo street.

The float Kitakannon Yama departs from the corner of Sanjō and Karasuma streets
(1960, Sanjō-Karasuma).
The yamahoko floats assemble at what was the departure point on Sanjō and Karasuma streets. At the center is Kitakannon Yama, on the right is Hachiman Yama, while Jōmyō Yama is on the left. The tiled building next to Kitakannon Yama is the Kyoto branch of the Daiichi bank (present the Mizuho bank), constructed in 1906.

Fune Hoko headed northward from the corner of Shijō and Teramachi streets
From 1956 to 1960, the Sakimatsuri procession went north up Ōike street from the corner of Shijō and Teramachi streets. This picture of the float Fune Hoko making a turn was taken from a western perspective on the corner of Shijō and Teramachi streets. The onlookers are overflowing on Shijo street.
An Outline of the Postwar Revival of the Yamahoko Ceremony

1947 The Chair of the Kyoto City Board of Tourism conducts negotiations with GHQ to revive the Gion festival and receives permission. Aspects of the yoiyama celebration are brought back, and Naginata Hoko makes a round trip to the place of enshrinement. Shinkōsai (procession of the gods, July 17); kankōsai (return procession, July 24).

1948 The ritual of purifying the portable shrines (mikoshiyai) is brought back after 6 years.

1949 The first postwar lottery to determine the order of march is implemented.

1950 Revival of the atomatsuri procession. The number of yamahoko floats taking part in the sakimatsuri and atomatsuri processions increases to 16.

1952 All yamahoko floats join the procession, just as before the war. In addition, the parade of lanterns is revived for the first time in 60 years. The float Kikusui Hoko participates in the procession as a temporary float. The Gion festival is selected as an "intangible cultural asset, with steps to be taken to foster it", according to the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties.

1953 The lottery to determine the order of march is held in front of the City of Kyoto Convention Center for the first time. Kikusui Hoko is officially revived with all natural wood fittings - a central tree, roof and carriage for the first time in 68 years.

1954 Traditional procession Nerimono is revived after 18 years by the East Gion Ochaya Association (at 1961 this custom is abandoned). Associations emerge to provide part-time work for students pulling or carrying the floats. NHK television does a national live broadcast.

1956 The route of the sakimatsuri procession changes, now running northward up Teramachi street and then westward along Oike street. Full-price seating is installed along the south side of Oike street (3,900 seats).

1957 In order to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the revival of the Gion festival, a Gion festival sound recording (songs performed by Shimakura Chiyoko and Yamagata Hideo) and commemorative cigarettes (15 million Peace brand cigarettes in 1.5 million packages) are sold. A public award for distinguished service to the Gion festival yamahoko progression is established by the mayor of Kyoto.

1959 The "Kyoto Yasaka Shrine Gion Festival" is selected to be an "intangible folk cultural asset that ought to be recorded", according to the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties.

1961 The route of the sakimatsuri procession is changed to move northward up Kawaramachi street, and then westward along Oike street.

1962 The 29 yamahoko floats of the Gion festival are declared important folk materials (this name is later changed to important tangible cultural assets). Due to construction on the Hankyō railway line, the float procession is cancelled.

1963 Perhaps due to a lack of workers to pull the floats, the procession is delayed. In order to make up for the lack of workers, the well-known float Hobō Yama has its wheels removed and is carried instead for the first time.

1966 The atomatsuri on July 24 and the sakimatsuri on July 17 are combined. In place of the atomatsuri, the parade of colorful hanagasa-style umbrellas is begun.

1968 Ten yamahoko floats are displayed at the Gion Yamahoko Hall, newly constructed at Maruyama Park. The film classic "Gion Festival" (starring Nakamura Kinnosuke and produced by the Japan Film Revival Association) makes its debut.

1977 Due to construction on the city subway, Karasuma street is closed, so all floats proceed along Shimarmachi street in order to return to the city. Further, the full-price seating is expanded between Karasuma and Shimarmachi streets. Following this, the disbandment of the procession takes place at the corner of Oike and Shimarmachi streets.

1986 A census begins of objects of foreign origin among the many decorations used in the festival. The support association admits residents of condominiums.

1988 The historical yamahoko Shijokasa Hoko is revived, and joins the procession.

1992 The Gion Festival Yamahoko Association becomes a corporation.

1994 The first major Gion festival exhibit opens at the Museum of Kyoto: "Gion Festival Exhibit -- Famous Treasures of the Yamahoko." An element commemorating the founding of the city of Kyoto, it combines elements from the Hakata Yamagasa festival, the Takayama festival, the Kawagoe festival and more, gathering 16 festival floats, originating from the Gion festival in their design, as a "National Gion Festival Float Procession", and runs along Shijō avenue from Gion Ishinden-shita to Kawaramachi street.

1997 The Ōtone Hoko Gion float orchestra (hayashi) is revived.

1998 The 100th anniversary of self-government by the city of Kyoto is celebrated in a special exhibit opening at the Kyoto Museum of Art: "The Beauty of the Gion Festival -- The People and Skills Who Supported the Festival."

2009 "Yamahoko, the Float Ceremony of the Gion Festival" is registered by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage.

2010 The Shiromachi Ōtone Hoko Preservation Association participates in the lottery drawing ceremony as an observer. The public incorporation of the preservation associations begins in this year. Discussions begin regarding the revival of the sakimatsuri and atomatsuri processions.

2011 Ōtone Hoko "Travel Chest" procession begins. Exhibition Room for Kyoto Intangible Cultural Heritage opens.

2013 A conference is called with the aim of reviving the Gion festival atomatsuri procession, and convened twice in July and August. Plans have now been made to revive the sakimatsuri and atomatsuri processions for the first time in 49 years at the 2014 Gion festival.

2014 The atomatsuri line of march is made public. The hanagasa procession, which originally replaced the atomatsuri procession, will also proceed.