

Standing at the Crossroads of Seki

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Abstract

This essay reveals the story behind the Seki summer festival, its magnificent wooden floats, and especially the music that transforms the event from an earthly pleasure to an art form of emotion that is part of Japan's performance culture. An introduction to Seki town history and the role it has so profoundly played in Japan's own long and vibrant development is also ripe for a new discovery. The aforementioned rites of summertime would not have been lifted to such artistic and spiritual heights if it were not for the underlying transcendence of Seki. Upon becoming the first foreigner to join one of Seki's oldest and most splendid festival groups the *Kozaki Matsuri Bayashi*(1), I would like to extend some of my observations and bring to the attention of my reader, the extraordinary significance of Seki town-not just as an ancient point of defense nor as a checkpoint by which tolls were paid, goods checked and travellers took rest, but as *the* point of departure between the glorious, the sacred, and that of the new frontier of Japan.

Keywords: barriers, new paths, old ways, love, reflection.

1. The Ancient Barrier Outposts: *Seki-sho*

“Thus saith the LORD, stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where *is* the good way, and walk there-in, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk *therein*. (Jeremiah 6:16)

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Nestled at the base of the Suzuka mountain range in what is now northwestern Mie prefecture, the geographic position of Seki town was by all accounts the reason for its birth. With its dramatic backdrop of mountains stretching unbroken from north to south, this natural barrier between the civilized western side and that of the yet undiscovered eastern side, the early Japanese rulers set-up *Seki-sho*, a collection of simple garrison-like towns with fortified walls and well controlled checkpoints, intended to keep their western land protected from any and all unwanted intruders. Seki town's subsequent modeling alongside the grand emergence of *Heian*, better known today as Kyoto city, in the late 8th century made for an attractive town with an unusually large number of *Shinto* shrines and Buddhist temples, including the centerpiece of Seki town, *Jizo-in* (the temple of the guardian of children), erected in AD 741 and housing what is believed to be the oldest guardian statue of its kind in Japan. This venerated female deity statue is, as legend has it, the wife of the Great Buddha-*Daibutsu*-of Todai-ji in Nara city (Hattori, 2011).

2. The *Ebisu* Reside on the Other Side

Today, we understand the area encompassing Nara, Kyoto, and also Osaka/Kobe as being “West of the Seki (barrier)”. In Japanese this is known as the *Kansai* region. On the opposite side of this ancient barrier, we know that the land falling under the great span of Tokyo as being “East of the Seki (barrier)”. In Japanese this is known as the *Kanto* region. Considering that Tokyo is actually more than four hundred kilometers from Seki town, it is quite hard to see the relevance in that terminology today but in the eighth and ninth centuries, the world of antiquity when Nara and Kyoto held the seat of the imperial power in the domain of *Yamato*, there was a striking contrast between the strange and mysterious lands on the *other side*, the Kanto side, as it was sparsely populated throughout by the *emishi* or *ebisu*, the old Japanese terms for the proto-white natives known today by their more modern name-*the Ainu*(2).

The fertile crescent of the *Yamato* on the western side of the great barrier was for the early Japanese as the eastern side was for these native people, a base of their civilization, albeit far from developed. The early Japanese looked upon the eastern land, the ancestral lands of these *ebisu* natives, much in the way

as the white European settlers of early America set their sights on the Wild West, home to its own native civilizations. The eastern lands encompassed mystery, extraordinary beauty, resources and limitless potential. It was from the *Yamato* plains where the primitive Japanese people slowly began to expand their young empire, acquiring much new land, and resources along the way, devastating the native *ebisu* people, their native culture, eventually pushing them far north to near oblivion.

3. Conquests Into the New Frontier: A New Route Appears

As the Japanese slowly advanced into the east, commencing what would become centuries of conflict with the *ebisu* (Maraini, 1960) their military might allowed for a major achievement with the establishment of the Kamakura military headquarters near the shadows of Mt. Fuji in the late 12th century. With the imperial court and military headquarters in Kyoto city, and a new military base at Kamakura in the eastern territory, the Japanese had firmly established their presence on both sides of the great barrier.

What developed out of the needs of the time were travel routes. The primary one, the *Tokaido* (Eastern Seaway) would become one single artery of traffic, strategically connecting two points for new development and expansion. The two points were the centers of power, Kyoto in the West and *Edo* (Tokyo) in the East. From *Edo* other routes reached farther into the far eastern wildernesses of *Dewa* and *Mutsu*, both of which now make up what is known in Japanese as *Tohoku*-the Northeast.

By the beginning of the 17th century, the powerful and extremely organized Tokugawa clan, having been victorious at the battle of *Sekigahara*, another prominent *Seki-sho* located some distance north of Seki town in what is now southwestern Gifu prefecture, subdued warring factions into one united Japan state initiating the relocation of all military operations from Kyoto city to their eastern powerbase, not far from Kamakura, in *Edo*. This new era called *Edo* (1603-1867) stimulated cultural and economic development for Japan. The role of the *Tokaido*, which was strictly controlled by the reins of the Tokugawa clan, was to connect the two most powerful regions, the *Kansai* and *Kanto*, in the newly

formed country.

4. Seki Town: The New Gateway

The emergence of the *Tokaido* at the beginning of the *Edo* era brought Seki town again into focus. The original transportation path to and from ancient Nara known as the *Yamato kaido* (the Road to Nara), the newly developed *Tokaido* (Eastern Seaway) stretching some 500 kilometers between the imperial city of Kyoto in the west and the new seat of the military government in the east at *Edo*, and the *Ise-Bestu kaido* (the Road to Ise), the sacred pilgrimage path to *Ise Jingu*, the Grand Shrine of Ise(3), all converged at Seki town, thus ensuring the town's significance. Nowhere in Japan did such vital paths to the sources of Japanese civilization both ancient and modern merge as one as they did at Seki town.

5. Ise: The Land of the Gods

'As the cock is the announcer of the passing of night and the coming of day, so do the three tori prepare the heart of a pious worshipper for his purified appearance before the god. His passing under the god-gate expels the darkness from his heart just as the darkness of night is lifted at dawn.' (*K. Yamaguchi, We Japanese, Tokyo, 1952.*)

From Nara, along the *Yamato kaido* they came, from Kyoto and *Edo* along the newly built *Tokaido* they came, and at the east entrance where the *tori of Ise*(4), (the 'god-gate' to Ise) stands, all who passed through Seki town stopped to give praise "*O-Ise-maeri surundesoo*" (Tanigawa, 2011) and for others, to begin their last leg -some 65 kilometers due south- to "the object of supreme veneration...a small, bare, and unadorned thatched edifice built of cypress wood in pure prehistoric style," (Maraini, 1960) the Grand Shrine of Ise.

Deep down in the Ise valley, the elusive character of the Japanese spirit, the *kami*, is consecrated at the Grand Shrine of Ise. Not actually embodied in one entity, but rather embraced in many things-from

human forms, on through to natural images and mythological manifestations, the *kami* is neither a god, in the Western sense, “nor lays down no system of ethics expressed in commandments and prohibitions.” (Maraini, 1960).

“It is very doubtful,” continues Maraiani, “whether even in ancient times *Shinto* required sacrifices; in all its right the emphasis is on offerings. A sacrifice implies pain, renunciation, self-punishment; an offering is an expression of pleasure and of a serene mind. The most typical *Shinto* rite is the *matsuri*.” Expressed simply as a communal type of celebration, the *matsuri*, or festival, is held to commemorate any number of important matters concerning the people. It is an expression of praise to their indigenous faith and the goodness it bestows upon them.

6. The Seki Town *Natsu-Matsuri*

Seki town’s nearly 2 kilometers long main-street is divided into three blocks. The east neighborhood is *Kozaki*, the middle is *Naka-machi*, and the western part is called *Shinjo*. Seki’s residents of the time, numbering perhaps less than a thousand, were inundated with travellers, upwards to 15,000 people passing through in a typical day (Hattori, 2011). To accommodate such a high volume of people, some forty plus hotels, not to mention bars, gambling houses and brothels of one kind or another found there place amongst the more than two hundred Buddhist temples and some thirty to forty *Shinto* Shrines (Hattori, 2011). Various shops and storefronts were opened and Mie prefecture’s oldest family run business, *Sekinoto*, the Door of Seki, was established in the 1630’s. For Seki’s townspeople the summer festival became an event that would always summon the people together in time for reflection and appreciation.

It is known for certain that a procession of dramatically decorated wooden floats appeared on the main-street of Seki town during the *Edo* era in the year 1801 (Sugitachi, 1986). In fact, sixteen floats, six from the neighborhood of *Shinjo*, and ten combined from the *Naka-machi* and *Kozaki* neighborhoods, were paraded along the stretch of the *Tokaido* in Seki town.

On one of these wooden floats, embroidered on its silk tapestry were two dates, 1716~1734, authenticating the actual birth date of the original festival (Sugitachi, 1986).

7. Saito Tarozaimon: The Imperial Music Master

Falling gravely ill at Seki town, *Saito Tarozaimon*, a grand master of the imperial court music of Kyoto city, was miraculously nursed back to health by the good graces of the people of Seki around the time of the *bakumatsu*, the closing days of the *Edo* era. During his long recovery, he witnessed Seki's summertime festival and inspired by the kindness shown to him by the people of Seki and perhaps a special someone, went about composing a song to accompany what was until then a music-less procession.

Saito Tarozaimon's skill for playing all the important instruments of the time was well known in the musical quarters of Kyoto, and his immense musical gifts extended to crafting musical compositions in addition to performing. Creating the melody and all musical parts by chanted verse first, *Tarozaimon* went about constructing a multi-layered composition inspired by both the majestic imperial court music and the warmth and love he felt for Seki town. His oral poem to the people of Seki town would, with the subsequent additions of a solo bamboo flute, various sized drums, percussion and lyrical accompaniment evolve into a sweeping five-part suite, encompassing all the dramatic qualities of the finest *monogatari*, love story.

The story he created for the people of Seki town was chanted to his original melody. It begins:

-*Saito Tarozaimon aitai koto yo to na (Meeting you was a blessing)*

-*Ruu-san Ruu-san Sorai *perhaps a name/unknown*

-*Tonari ba-san yunbei tomosu (Your care for me...)*

-*Aitai koto jaa to naa (I long to see you again)* Sugitachi, 1986

For remembering the rhythmic accompaniment, played by boys and girls of primary school age, his humorous but unforgettable chant began:

-*Manjyu ga mitsu (Three sticky buns)*

-*Manjyu ga mitsu (Three sticky buns)*

-*Awasete mutsu (Makes Six)* -Tanigawa 2011

This melody line and one short rhythmic part are the only remaining pieces of the original oral composition. Almost the entire text of what *Saito Tarozaimon* had to say, having never been written down, is lost. His verse though in the form of one beautifully moving instrumental still lives today for all the people of Seki town, and will for generations to come.

8. 関の山 *Seki no Yama: To The Very Edge and Back*

When the summer evening in late July sets to darkness and the candle lit red lanterns adorning the giant wooden float blur into one, the slow waltz-like cadence of *Saito Tarozaimon's* ballad to Seki town fills the warm air. The people of Seki take pause from their lives, come out of their homes, in respect to such beauty, to reflect upon what has come and what awaits tomorrow. They are drawn into the spirit of the *matsuri* and pass into a timeless realm, a phenomenon described by Joseph Campbell.

“The two worlds, the divine and the human, can be pictured only as distinct from each other—different as life and death, as day and night,” “Nevertheless—and here is a great key to the understanding of myth and symbol—the two kingdoms are actually one. The realm of the gods is a forgotten dimension of the world we know.”

Standing at the crossroads of Seki town, the signposts to the old ways give us guidance. May we never forget.

Notes

1) For three consecutive years beginning from late spring 2000, I performed on *taiko* drums in the Hirosaki *Neputa Matsuri* with the *Hamadan Bayashi* in Hirosaki city, Aomori prefecture. Relocating to Seki town in January 2003, I began studying the *yokobue* (bamboo flute) with *Kozaki Matsuri Bayashi's* principal musician, Kazuhiro Tanigawa. After a year and half of study, I was allowed the privilege to ride atop Kozaki's *Yama* (giant wooden festival float) for the summer festival in July 2004. As of this writing, I have played in eight consecutive summer festivals with the *Kozaki Matsuri Bayashi* group.

2) Japanese history has been extremely unkind to the native people collectively known today as the *Ainu*. Younger generations of Japanese these days may only know of them as the people who lived long ago on the far northern island, Hokkaido. In fact, and as Maraini explains, “they were stubborn enemies of the Japanese...” He goes on, “When the Japanese started populating the area around Fuji (Mt. Fuji)...they found there the ancestors of the *Ainu*. The two peoples lived for centuries in a more or less permanent state of war...” Maraini also points out that these native people left behind remnants of their civilization in the “pottery of the *jomon-doki* (cord pattern) type,” and names of places. Mt. Fuji or *Fuchi*, as was their name for the goddess of fire, is just one of many examples.

3) The Grand Shrine of Ise is made up of two shrines located a few kilometers apart from one another in the wooded valley of Ise. The *Geku* (Outer Shrine) is dedicated to *Toyouke-Omikami*, the goddess of earth and harvest, and the *Naiku* (Inner Shrine) is dedicated to *Amaterasu-Omikami*, the goddess of the sun.

4) First documented in AD 685, the Ise shrine is taken down every twenty years and “meticulously reconstructed in accordance with the same immutable design, which is followed with the strictness of a religious rite.” (Maraini, 1960) The existing “*tori of Ise*” which stands at the eastern entrance to Seki town is then replaced with the gate moved from the Grand Shrine of Ise.

*The next reconstruction of Ise shrine will be in 2013 and *Kozaki Matsuri Bayashi* will perform the music of *Tarozaimon* and the summer festival during the christening of the new gate upon its arrival in Seki town. (Tanigawa, 2011)

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