

## [Parade Puzzle: studying Japanese mikoshi parades](#)

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**When I think of a parade as a puzzle** , it gives me an imaginative way to think about it and its many pieces. The parade, in its entirety represents a communal effort of people gathering and creating something for themselves and public consumption. It's a banana split extravaganza that our eyes eat up. It's a Korean patbingsu/bingsu with shaved ice, red bean paste, fruit, and ridiculous number of tasty other ingredients. It's a Filipino halo-halo with shaved ice, purple yam, palm fruit preserves and layers and layers of yummy things. I could go on, but you get it, a parade is an edible cultural delight for the eyes and ears.

Since it's summer where I live, I'll focus on a summer parade, a **Japanese mikoshi parade**. There are Japanese communities in and outside of Japan that celebrate with a mikoshi. A few terms to understand before I begin: natsu matsuri and mikoshi. Generally speaking, "matsuri" refers to a festival, "natsu" refers to summer, and "mikoshi" refers to a portable shrine paraded around. I acknowledge these are very simplistic definitions; however, it is a starting point.

**Personal Fieldwork:** My photos from the 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Bridge USA Natsu Matsuri held at the Torrance Cultural Arts Center (Torrance, California, July 7, 2013). Two versions: adult and children's mikoshi parades (click on images for a few more details)

If I imagine these photos as a kind of puzzle to solve, then I can look at all the elements on display and ponder the symbolism, the meaning, or personal connection of each object or action in the image. What traditions are on display? What kind of rituals are practiced? What's the meaning of the lanterns, bells, phoenix, torii, and other decorative objects on the large mikoshi? Why a children's version? What are the carriers of the mikoshi actually doing? What's the role of men, women, and children? Does the clothing have significance? ...

[mikoshi-parade-adults-backview-torrance2-2013.jpg](#)



[mikoshi-adults.jpg](#)



[mikoshi-kids-front.jpg](#)



[mikoshi-kids-chairs.jpg](#)



**Literature Searches:** Reading articles, books, and websites also supplements the first-person observations and interviews. So I spend a lot of time reading ethnographic studies about the topic.

Here are a few texts that I have referenced when studying Japanese festivals (English language texts)

- Ashkenazi, Michael. "Cultural Tensions as Factors in the Structure of a Festival Parade." *Asian Folklore Studies* 46, no.1 (1987): 35-54.
- Ashkenazi, Michael. *Matsuri: Festivals of A Japanese Town*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993.
- Roemer, Michael K. "Ritual Participation and Social Support in a Major Japanese Festival." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 46, no. 2 (June., 2007): 185-200.
- "Shinto Symbols (Continued)." *Contemporary Religions in Japan* 7, no. 2 (1966): 89-142. (Also

available online <https://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/nfile/3164>)

After reading Michael Ashkenazi's fieldwork on a Japanese parade in Yuzawa, a town located in the Northeast Japan, I wondered how I could relate his work to my understanding of the Torrance, California mikoshi parades.

Initially, Ashkenazi's fieldwork had me thinking about terms like sacred, ritual, and profane. Could this parade studied by Ashkenazi be both sacred and profane? Was it a parade and a procession? What were religious and secular aspects of the event? How was it reflecting ritualized behavior? How is Japanese history and Buddhism and Shinto religious important to these parades? Are these questions and terms relevant to my study of mikoshi parades in Torrance, California?

**As I read Ashkenazi's work, I thought, ok, how has he described Yuzawa's largest parade, the Daimyo Gyoretsu parade? How are the mikoshi parades part of this larger parade structure.** The large parade has multiple sections: a ritualized component (lord's parade); a shrine parade (mikoshi parade); trucks with dioramas of Japanese mythology scenes (kazariyama); and an informal contemporary parade with no particular theme and lots of diverse participants (i.e., folk dancers, popular cartoon characters, other mikoshis sponsored by neighborhoods, bands, etc.). (Ashkenazi, *Matsuri*)

**What are specific elements of the mikoshi parades that Ashkenazi discussed? How could it be relevant to a study of Japanese American mikoshi parades?** He described the mikoshi, as a shrine parade in which "there are several recognized styles, but generally (the palanquin) is made of lacquered wood fitted with brass beam ends, wind chimes, and a brass phoenix on the roof"(Ashkenazi, *Matsuri*, 51). He associated the mikoshi "with the transportation, or the presence, of the kami," while also representing festivity, entertainment, a "marker of community solidarity," something "uniquely Japanese," and a way to teach children neighborhood values (Ashkenazi, *Matsuri*, 52-53, 60-61). He described the costumes of the carriers focusing on the variation of historical uniforms in comparison to the happi coats emblazoned with neighborhood names (Ashkenazi, *Matsuri*, 60). He contrasted the more ritualized, formal mikoshi parade that involved silent participation with the mikoshis at the tail of the parade. These mikoshis at the tail end were loud affairs with chanting, singing, and bouncing of the mikoshi.

**How does Ashkenazi's Japanese mikoshi compare to the Japanese American mikoshi in my photographs above?** There were key elements that Ashkenazi's work addressed, such as the presence of different types of mikoshis, details about the kami (diety/spirit) rituals, the palanquin aesthetic, and the participants' roles and costumes. He also discussed what the mikoshi represented for the participants, both adults and children. A similar model of analysis could be applied to an examination of the Japanese American mikoshi I observed.

**Final thoughts to ponder:** Studying any parade requires research. I have mentioned some literature on mikoshi parades, and only a brief excerpt from Michael Ashkenazi's extensive research. Depending on my area of interest, I could also approach the mikoshi parade with a

focus on the religious aspects, aesthetics of the costumes, mikoshi symbolism and ritual, the children's roles, or even American cultural influences on a Japanese tradition.

**There are so many pieces to any parade puzzle. And ultimately a parade is more than a dessert. It can reflect local traditions, aesthetics, beliefs, interests...the lists goes on and on.**

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