

The Two Roles of Aso Shrine

Preventing eruptions and promoting the harvest

The rites and festivals performed at Aso Shrine serve two distinct functions: first, to prevent eruptions of the volcano, and second, to ensure bountiful rice harvests.

Let us look at eruption prevention first. Every year in early June, priests from Aso Shrine conduct a “crater-calming ritual” (*kako chinsai*). Approaching the rim of the largest crater, they chant a Shinto prayer and fling three wooden wands decorated with white zigzag paper streamers down into the crater. (The three wands are offerings to the three main volcano deities: Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto, his wife Asotsuhime no Mikoto, and their grandchild Hikomiko no Kami.)

The annual harvest comes around with much greater regularity than volcanic eruptions, so the shrine conducts many more rites and festivals related to rice growing than to crater calming. These correspond to the cycle of the seasons. Spring is when the rice is planted. Summer is when the rice grows, but also when it is most likely to suffer from too much or too little rain, excessive heat, or insect damage. Autumn is when the harvest is brought in and the deities are thanked for their bounty. (This explains why most Japanese festivals take place in the autumn.)

Following this cycle, in March Aso Shrine holds a “fire-swinging” festival (Hifuri-Shinji), when torches made of reeds are swung around to celebrate the marriage of Kunitatsu no Mikoto, one of the shrine’s 12 deities, to his wife, represented by the branches of a sacred tree brought from another shrine in Aso. Their union is believed to lead to a good harvest.

The aim of the Onda Festival, held at the end of July, is the same: to pray for a good harvest. Since the rice is already well developed by this time of year, local people take the shrine deities out on a roughly five-kilometer tour of inspection through the paddies in four portable shrines. The shrine priests follow the portable shrines on horseback. Fourteen *unari* – women dressed from head to foot in white, their faces concealed, bear food offerings for the deities on their heads. After them come three local boys carrying stick figures topped with the heads of a man, a woman, and an ox; these figures together represent the productive power of labor. Spectators toss ripening ears of rice at the portable shrines; the more ears that stick to the shrines’ roofs, the better the harvest is

expected to be.

In late September, the “festival of the fruit of the field” (Tanomi-sai) takes place to give thanks for the rice harvest. A display of horseback archery, held on the approach road to the lower shrine, is dedicated to the deities of the shrine. Other Aso Shrine branch shrines in the caldera have their own smaller festivals with specific agricultural aims, such as fending off strong winds or frost.

In recognition of their cultural significance, Aso’s agricultural festivals were designated an Important Intangible Folk-Cultural Property by the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 1982.