

AGON SHU HOSHI MATSURI 2017

(Publicity)

Annual fire rites festival a deeply sacred event Agon Shu founder exists as a spiritual presence

Tens of thousands of people attend the Agon Shu Buddhist Association's Fire Rites Festival every Feb. 11 amid the hills to the east of the ancient Japanese capital of Kyoto.

The 2017 festival was, as in past years, a spectacular and deeply spiritual experience, attracting a total of 400,000 people. But there was one major difference between this year's event and previous ones. It was the first festival since the Rev. Seiyu Kiriya, the association's founder and former president, ended his earthly existence on Aug. 29.

The Agon Shu faithful believe that Kiriya became a spiritual being and entered Nirvana — the ultimate goal of a true Buddhist. Some of Kiriya's holy ashes were kept in a shari-to container, as were the holy ashes of Buddhism founder Gautama Buddha. The shari-to was borne on a special mikoshi

palanquin into the amphitheater where the Fire Rites Festival was held.

Kiriya as 'guardian'

So even though Seia Fukata, who now serves as the president of Agon Shu, officiated at the festival, Kiriya remains the founder and "guardian" of Agon Shu. Kiriya is thus very much still a participant in the Fire Rites Festival — the most important event of the year for Agon Shu faithful and the world's biggest fire rites festival.

This year's event was special in another way, thanks to a light frosting of snow that lay on the trees surrounding the site and the two huge pyres waiting to be lit in the center of the amphitheater. The snow lent a delicate beauty to the festival, accentuated by the bright blue sky and the brilliant sunshine.

Unique combination

So just what is the Agon Shu Fire

Rites Festival? Perhaps it's best to understand the event as a unique combination of practices taken from Buddhism and Japan's indigenous Shinto religion.

This is reflected by the fact that the centerpiece of the festival is two goma-dan pyres, each 11 meters wide and seven meters high. One is the bukkai-dan, for the liberation of the spirits of the departed, while the other is the shinkai-dan, for the prayers, requests and desires of the living.

As thousands of the faithful and curious visitors thronged the amphitheater after walking along the forested path leading to the main compound, the crashing chords of a classical composition written especially for the festival by the late composer Toshiro Mayuzumi resounded. Brightly colored fireworks burst against the bright blue vault of the morning sky.

Hundreds of Agon Shu faithful wearing yamabushi mountain-priest costumes then filed into the amphitheater, blowing conch shells and forming orderly ranks in front of the richly decorated main altar. The palanquin bearing Kiriya's holy ashes occupied a place of honor between the altar and the snow-dusted goma-dan.

Hearts filled with joy

The voice of Kiriya then filled the hearts of the faithful with joy as a video of the late spiritual leader was played on a large screen beside the altar. Other sounds soon reverberated through the amphitheater. A Shinto priest chanted prayers, followed by the otherworldly strains of gagaku ancient court music and mesmeric shomyo chanting.

Women have always played a vital role in the Agon Shu organization, including in the Fire Rites Festival. But in recent years they've been taking part in more high-profile ways. Female yamabushi joined their male counterparts in mondo ritual question-and-answer exchanges, shot arrows during the hokyu-saho ritual — in which archers shot arrows in the four cardinal directions, the center and the northeast — and took part in the many ceremonies.

All of these rituals are the precursor to the event's piece de resistance: the lighting of the two goma-dan pyres. Agon Shu members used large torches to ignite the pyres at their bases, and huge plumes of smoke and fire soon burst from the upper parts of the goma-dan. Not too long after, attendants began throwing gomagi prayer sticks, on which people have written their personal prayers and desires, into the flames.

The heat of the flames soon dispelled the cold and filled all those present with a palpable spiritual energy. A total of 29 million gomagi were burned in this year's Fire Rites Festival.

Pure source

The Agon Shu story started in 1978. That's when Kiriya established the association after he'd spent many years seeking spiritual truth. He eventually found it in the Agama Sutras, the purest source of Buddhist doctrine.

Lord Buddha is the ultimate object of worship and the first element of faith for Agon Shu believers.

The Buddha's teachings and training methods, known as the dharma, are the second element of belief for the faithful, followed



The lighting of the two goma-dan pyres AGON SHU



Video of the late spiritual leader Seiyu Kiriya AGON SHU



Kiriya's holy ashes are carried. AGON SHU



Top: The venue of the Fire Rites Festival; Above: A female yamabushi performs the hokyu-saho ritual. AGON SHU

by the community of believers and its leaders called the sangha — in this case, Agon Shu. The organization casts a wide doctrinal net by combining elements from the three main schools of Buddhism, as well as ancient divine laws.

International scope

Agon Shu's activities are international in scope. It has a strong presence in Sri Lanka, for example, and in recent years has developed strong ties with Buddhists in Bhutan. The organization has also held fire rites ceremonies in locations as var-

ied as the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Jerusalem, the Auschwitz concentration camp and Siberia.

In July, Agon Shu plans to hold a shipboard ceremony in the waters north of Hokkaido in remembrance of the soldiers and civilians who died on nearby islands in the closing days of World War II.

It will be the first such special Agon Shu event held without Kiriya. But the faithful believe he will continue to guide them on the path to enlightenment as his legacy and spirit live on in their hearts.

Festival impresses overseas visitors

Guests from overseas who attended the Fire Rites Festival were impressed by the spectacular event.

"I think it's really amazing," said Karen Song, a British woman who was visiting Japan for the 10th time. This was the first time she'd attended the festival. "As soon as they saw me, they gave me a guide in English. I was struck by the heat from the bonfires!"

Her husband, Dominic, added that he and Karen were both impressed by how well organized the festival was, along with everything else in Japan.

Ian Reader, retired professor of Japanese studies, University of Manchester, has attended previous Fire Rites Festivals. He thinks it's significant that women have come to play a more important role in the event over the years.