Shinto festival carries on centuries-old tradition in Japan

By Malcolm Foster
The Associated Press

CHICHIBU NIGHT FESTIVAL. *Participants clad in kimono prepare to pull a float before it goes to the town central square at the Chichibu Night Festival in Chichibu, north of Tokyo, Japan. Moving six towering floats up a hill and into the town center is the culminating moment of a Shinto festival that has evolved from a harvest thanksgiving into a once-a-year meeting between two local gods. (AP Photo/Toru Hanai)*

CHICHIBU, Japan — As fireworks light up the winter night, scores of men, women, and teenagers crying *washoi, washoi* haul the last of six towering, lantern-covered floats up a small hill and into the town center, the culminating moment of a Shinto festival that has evolved from a harvest thanksgiving into a once-a-year meeting between two local gods.

The Chichibu Night Festival, which has roots stretching more than 1,000 years, is one of three famous Japanese festivals to feature huge floats that can top 23 feet and weigh up to 15 tons. They are pulled through the streets on large wooden wheels by hundreds of residents in traditional festival garb — headbands, black leggings, and thick cotton jackets emblazoned with Japanese characters — to drums, whistles, and exuberant chants.

Shinto is Japan's indigenous religion that goes back centuries. It is an animism that believes there are thousands of *kami*, or spirits, inhabiting nature, such as forests, rivers, and mountains. People are encouraged to live in harmony with the spirits and can ask for their help. Ancestors also become kami and can help the living.

The two-day festival has its roots in an older tradition of villagers giving thanks to the nearby mountain god for helping them during the planting and harvesting season, said Minoru Sonoda, the chief priest of the Chichibu Shrine and a former Kyoto University professor of religious studies. In 2016, it was designated a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage.

"It's a time to celebrate the bounty of nature," Sonoda said.

During medieval times, the festival evolved into a celebration of an annual rendezvous between the nearby mountain god and the goddess of the town. The latter is carried in an ornate ark-like box by a group of white-clad men through streets to the central park, where it rests while the six floats slowly converge on the crowded square, each one's arrival celebrated with a burst of fireworks.

But these days, many Japanese who flock to the festival, which draws about 200,000 people every December, don't know either of those stories and say the event holds no religious meaning for them — but they do want to maintain the tradition. They visit the town, about 90 minutes by train northwest of Tokyo, simply for a fun, cultural experience: walking the thronged streets, watching the procession, and eating from the hundreds of food stalls selling grilled squid, yakitori chicken skewers, and dozens of other snacks.

Some may squeeze in a quick visit to the Chichibu Shrine to offer a prayer, typically done by clapping one's hands twice to get the attention of the gods and then bowing with folded hands.

"I like the fireworks and the food. Purely to enjoy. I don't really think about the religious aspects," said Mitsuo Yamashita, a 69-year-old retiree who has come to the festival for the past 15 years. "Japanese aren't very religious, and in other ways we're all over the place religiously."

Many Japanese freely mix religions depending on the occasion, visiting a Shinto shrine at New Year's, holding a Buddhist funeral, or getting married in a Christian wedding, a popular option even though only 1% of the population is Christian.

"I don't know if that means we're flexible or if we don't have convictions," Yamashita said.

Religion seen differently

Roaming the streets in the afternoon, a group of high school girls decked out in festival jackets and headbands, who later joined in pulling the floats, said the festival wasn't religious at all for them. And yet they emphatically said they believed the story about the two gods meeting that evening.

"It's romantic!" said Rea Kobayashi, 17.

The girls also said they would celebrate Christmas with a decorated tree and gift-giving and didn't see any problem mixing religions.

"No problem! That's normal. Most Japanese do that," said Rio Nishimiya, 18. "We're good at that. If it's fun, that's all that matters."

"Japanese are flexible," said her friend, Meiri Shimada, also 18. "That's a good thing!"

Such views are shared by many Japanese. Attitudes toward religion are ambiguous. Many would say they aren't religious — and yet every year millions of Japanese visit Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples across Japan and have little shrines in their homes where they pray.

Religion is viewed differently in Japan, and in some other parts of Asia, than in the west or the Islamic world, where there is an emphasis on individual faith and a set of beliefs, or a creed, based on a sacred text such as the Bible or Koran.

In Japan, religion is more of a cultural, communal, and ritualistic thing than a personal faith.

Shinto has no sacred text or clearly defined theology, and many Japanese would be hard-pressed to summarize it, including many visitors to this festival.

"It's a religion of life," said Sonoda, the chief priest, in an attempt to summarize Shinto. "It's something inherited from ancestors that provides a spirituality passed on from parent to child. And this isn't just for humans, but we are also linked to animals and all living things. It's because of them that we're alive."

"Worldview may be a better way to describe it," he said.

There are no definitive numbers on Shinto believers in Japan simply because there's nothing definite to count. "We don't use the phrase 'believers,'" Sonoda said. There are no weekly services and no missionaries to spread Shinto.

Coexistence

Sonoda said other folk religions share traits with Shinto. He recalls visiting a Hopi native American community years ago. They were holding a festival giving thanks to the spirits that lived in a nearby mountain and came down every spring to help the people with the planting season, and in winter would return to the mountain, he said.

"That made a big impression on me," he said.

There are more than 80,000 Shinto shrines across Japan, and nearly as many Buddhist temples, and the two have generally coexisted peacefully after Buddhism's introduction to Japan in the 6th century, along with Confucian thought from China.

That long history of coexistence is one key reason behind Japanese attitudes toward religion.

"Each religion had a different role, and these three — Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism — shaped Japanese culture," said Susumu Shimazono, a professor of religion at Tokyo's Sophia University, a Jesuit school. "There was some dogma, but none of these religions stressed exclusiveness. This sort of combination of ideas and philosophies is typical of East Asia."

Experts say interest in Shinto among ordinary Japanese is holding steady or even increasing. As one measure of this, visitors to the Ise Grand Shrine, Japan's most important shrine, have grown in recent years, running to 8.9 million through November, up from 7.8 million during the same period last year and 8.5 million for all of 2017.

Shinto is also closely entwined with the Japanese imperial family, holding that the

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Deadly India fire in one of thousands of illegal factories

By Sheikh Saaliq and Emily Schmall
The Associated Press

NEW DELHI — Day laborers in one of New Delhi's most congested neighborhoods demonstrated against unsafe working conditions a day after at least 43 people were killed in a devastating fire at an illegal factory.

Dozens of workers who were asleep when the fire broke out were trapped in the burning four-story building with little ventilation and only one exit.

Tucked in an alleyway tangled with electrical wires, firefighters had to fight the blaze from 330 feet away. Rescuers carried out survivors and the dead one by one.

The building, zoned for residential use, had been clandestinely and crudely converted into a cluster of small factories in a pattern repeated in old and crowded areas across the city of 28 million.

Tens of thousands of such spaces have been closed in a drive spurred by a decades-old court case, but a Delhi Municipal Corporation census counted more than 30,000 illegal factories last year.

The tragedy illustrates the struggle of authorities to control the proliferation of illegal factories in ancient parts of the city that were long exempt from regulation, despite the Supreme Court order to close them or revamp the surrounding city infrastructure, including widening roads and installing water service, according to New Delhi's master plan.

Factories operating in areas zoned residential were ordered closed.

"What happened in Delhi was unfortunately they were completely illegalized, so what we have now is this mushrooming happening in completely underground ways, all over the city. They moved the entire sector to the underground," said Anuj Bhuwania, an associate law professor at Ambedkar University in New Delhi who has studied the public interest litigation cases that spurred the Supreme Court order.

More than 100 migrant workers earning as little as $2 a day making handbags, caps, and other garments worked in the fire-gutted building's 500 square meters (about 5,400 square feet). The building was built about 15 years ago as a residential complex and later quietly turned into a commercial hub, according to Delhi Municipal Corporation officials.

The dense neighborhood is home to thousands of migrant workers from across India who often live and work in the same space.

Aslam, a local resident who goes by one name, said the building was among many that lack necessary clearances and fire safety equipment.

He said there was a small fire in the same building in March. There were no reported injuries and local residents put it out themselves, but it should have set off alarm bells, he said.

"The building was a disaster in the making. Almost every building in this neighborhood is unsafe," Aslam said.

Manufacturing in New Delhi has declined with a clampdown on illegal activity and the rise of the service sector. There were about 130,000 factory spaces in 2001, according to an official economy survey. With growing public concern about industrial pollution contributing to New Delhi's noxious air, authorities have shuttered tens of thousands of illegal factory operations since then.

The 30,000-plus illegal factories found by the Delhi Municipal Corporation census last year are nearly quadruple the number of factories registered with New Delhi's planning department in 2017.

Jai Prakash, a municipal administrator in New Delhi, said they are continuously trying to close illegal factories and small manufacturing units.

One complication is the shortage of affordable housing.

Many of these spaces also serve as sleeping quarters for poor laborers and their families who migrate from Indian villages and small towns for employment.

Another administrator, Varsha Joshi, said it is building owners who usually turn residential buildings into commercial hubs. Aslam said that often, each floor of a building is informally leased to a different commercial tenant who uses middlemen to find contract workers.

The owner of the building that caught fire recently was detained on suspicion of culpable homicide not amounting to murder. He remains in custody but hasn't been formally charged while the investigation continues. Bhuwania said cracking down in this case would do little to keep small factories from operating within Delhi.

"Being so fundamentalist about zoning in this city makes no sense. This is not the reality of the city," he said. "This is a fantasy city that they want to build."