Fictocritical Hakata: Yamakasa Ethos as Corporeal Tradition

Tim Cross*

Fictocriticism is an experimental genre of writing. It makes an argument with storytelling—or poetry—as its vehicle. It might be called a mischievous little intellectual genre.

Stephen Muecke

Fictocriticism might be most usefully defined as hybridized writing that moves between the poles of fiction ('invention'/ 'speculation') and criticism ('deduction'/'explication'), of subjectivity ('interiority') and objectivity ('exteriority').

Amanda Nettelbeck

We assume the inventiveness of argument and the creativity of truths.

Katrina Schlunke and Anne Brewster

Narratives of narratives, narratives on narratives and narrator

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and narrative co-mingling so that there is no single home for the writing self.

Katrina Schlunke

FINAL ESSAY

"Primitivity is at the heart of the modern nation state." Stephen Muecke
"The sacred is only a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled." Georges Bataille

Discuss with reference to local experiences of life in Japan.

For extra credit, refer to the opposition between myth and histories, magic, and ritual on one hand, and rationality and the category of the modern on the other.

THESIS: Japan is primitive. ["handwritten" #1 typeface]

Evidence: Until the end of WWII, the Emperor was the divine leader of our Japanese tribe. For us Japanese he was sacred, like our ancestors continue to be. Each August I must work very hard, cleaning my grandfather's house on Nokonoshima. Purity is important because our family is welcoming back the spirits of our ancestors to Grandfather's home, but my father still tells me I am not allowed to light the fire that guides them towards our Buddhist altar. Each summer a priest from Shirahige Shrine does some prayers to officially open and close the Nokonoshima swimming season. These prayers scare away bad luck and attract the god who protects children. At home, each morning my father gives rice, Noko oranges, and fresh tea to my dead mother and he talks to her black and white
photograph in the Buddhist altar.

Conclusion: Japan is primitive because we believe in the codes and forces of magic and rituals, and the dead still control the living. What makes us Japanese is this sacred Japanese identity itself. Perhaps it is this Japanese tribal spirit that is worshipped by our Prime Ministers at Yasukuni Shrine.

ANTITHESIS: Japan is modern.

Evidence: In 2001, 1% of Japanese GDP was spent on Japanese military expenditure. This total of US$38.5 billion is about 5% of the world total military expenditure. This amount has not really changed for the past decade. Japan’s ODA budget for 1991-2000 was the highest in the world. In that decade, the United States spent US$93 billion when Japan spent US$118 billion. In 1998, Japan was the world’s largest donor to 42 countries, including its regional neighbours Indonesia, China, Thailand, India, and the Philippines. In 1999, Japan’s annual ODA budget was US$15.3 billion.

Conclusion: After leaving the League of Nations in 1933, Japan is now a responsible member of the world community of nations. Under the pacifist Constitution, the Self Defense Forces are permitted to protect Japan. Japan has been supporting environmentally friendly projects in developing countries in the region.

SYNTHESIS: Japan is primitive and modern.

Evidence: We Japanese have our rituals for our private magic, and we have our rituals for our national state. Our private dead and national patriotic dead connect the past to the present. Neurophysiologist Dr Tsunoda says
that the three links of brain-culture-language are the national reproduction system for Japanese. But without the idea of someone outside Japan, and the possibility of the convulsive communication of violent warfare with outsiders, the links between body, life and signs are not enough to hold up the nation.

Conclusion: In the ideology supermarket, state nationalism remains the best seller, and down the aisle of cultural nationalism plenty of merchandise goes out the door too.

Nanakuma Tarō

FINAL ESSAY: Feedback  ["handwritten" #2 typeface]
Well done Tarō. One minor point about your Japan is modern Antithesis. Choosing the military as modern feeds into current debates about the pacifist constitution of Japan. And the technology of warfare is cutting-edge modern but the institution of armies is as old as taxes. Art museums, like military forces, are nationally funded but these hallowed spaces are more clearly a product of the project of modernity. The world of art has its own sacred cows. Certain rituals sustain the magic of art. Art museums: the front line for culture wars, retail outlets for cultural nationalism? Just a thought. Anyway, thanks for your solid work these past four years, Taro.

tim

Yamakasa Diary

[N]ationalism's role in determining or undermining distinctions

(4)
between fiction, myth, and history could itself become a subject for historians as novelists. ... But then what? What happens once these shifting relations are made visible?

Joan Scott

Is this what diary-writing is all about, too, writing not to yourself but to the spirits? ... Writing thereby turns out to be more than a communication between you and me. First and foremost it is a conversation with the spirits.

Michael Taussig

What is this Yamakasa spell that Your festival gods have cast over the men of Hakata? Masses of men brave the summer sun, July humidity, the early morning chill of typhoon rain. Subjecting themselves to the logic of Your tradition, they limp, bleeding, battered and wheezing on the roadside. For one fortnight, midday glare or the bewitched hours, men are cursed by a passion for swarming around the roaring float, re-enacting a desperate rite to rid the town of the plague seven centuries ago.

Why is Your tradition so compelling as a social force, magnifying its own vitality? Concerns about the plague invading Hakata are safely enclosed in the past tense, but the community continues to worship its own gods, heroes and mythology. The customs of the merchant class of Hakata have come to represent Fukuoka Prefecture and Japan. Men surviving with their wits and the prosthetic of computer technology spend fifty weeks a year devoted to the bottom line. For one fortnight, able-bodied men burn with the vigor of a deeper narrative.
The masculine pleasures of tradition might be the clarity of vertical relationships tempered by camaraderie across the ranks, intensified by the proud performance of assigned duties. Unified by a belief in collective action, Hakata men stand in their Yamakasa uniform of loincloth and the team colours of their mizuhappi coat announcing their nagare team and town affiliation. With an urgent commitment to the satisfactory completion of Your Yamakasa rites, men submit to the authority of that which must be shouldered. On leave from their day jobs, each Yamakasa day is lived with the joy that exceeds a year charted by the dialogue of spreadsheets and invoices.

Voices worshipping You crack with wear as emotional fire becomes the primary currency of communication. Language is purified to a simple chant that reverberates off buildings, its volume a physical feedback driving runners closer to the end of their designated stage.

Momentum is the force that You unleash and it becomes a law unto itself. Carried onwards by the shouting wave, across the slick dangers of pedestrian crossings and manhole covers, the blind anger of the float bangs ahead with a relentless disregard for the red traffic lights. Against this furious concentration that races the clock, squads of police
line the course, immobile and ranked in their own uniforms, preventing any collisions between the ancient and the modern.

REQUEST [different layout, typeface]

As one of Japan’s big three festivals, with roughly 760 years of history, Hakata Gion Yamakasa is nationally registered as tourist event that is highly regarded. Yamakasa participants are asked to please observe the following rules to ensure that this citizen festival is a pleasant success.
1 For the *dai-agari* honour of sitting on the shrine-float, you must wear the red and white *shirushi* insignia.
2 Individuals who are not members of the supervising district team responsible for the smooth operation of Hakata Gion Yamakasa are not permitted to climb on the Yamakasa shrine-float.
3 Violent conduct is absolutely prohibited.
4 It is prohibited to carry anything other than the *kakinawa* rice straw rope. (It is absolutely prohibited to use non-*kakinawa* ropes.)
5 Do not become "naked": wear your *mizuhappi* garment.
6 Do not lay a finger on the *kazariyama* and *kakeyama* until the supervising district team gives their permission, after the official end of Yamakasa activities.
7 Do not demand alcohol, food, or money.
8 For the duration of the Yamakasa festival, it is the responsibility of each *nagare* team to manage any cars and other vehicles obstructing the course.

**VIOLENT SHUT-OUTS AND DRINK-DRIVING ARE SEVERELY PROHIBITED.**

[smaller typeface] Hakata District Police Station 412 0110
Pre-performance anxieties

Fear is a masculine emotion. Fear of failure, fear of ridicule, that sting in the stomach that burns the face, these feelings prop up the desire of certain men to compete and succeed. Yamakasa might be a monument to this cycle of forces. Hakata bodies and emotions shaped by the mesh of this tradition strive to measure up. What we do and what we feel compel each of us to become the Yamakasa ideal.

Obstacles to masculine success are often subjective. Running around town in Yamakasa teams: buttocks on parade. More than the violation of modesty and the prospect of being the subject of smirking glances, what I dreaded most was walking into the tsumesho tent headquarters for the first time.

This anxiety is not merely that compound of uncertainty that afflicts most rank beginners embarking a new
adventure into territory thick with precedent. Deeper inadequacies are at play here.

After a decade in the Fukuoka communities of tea and noh, I perform the illusion of moving freely without feeling foreign. The embodied codes of tearoom conduct and the backstage hierarchies that underpin the rules about who can be where during a noh performance, these modes are becoming part of my identity repertoire. At the low intermediate levels of Hōshō Ryū noh, Nambō Ryū tea and Takayasu Ryū noh drum study, cultural citizenship is one nationality that requires no passport.

Crossing the boundaries maintained by Kushida Shrine is more difficult than enduring the novice kneeling discomfort that must be mastered before full concentration can be given to learning tea procedures, etiquette and sensibilities. If the foreign brain and body is a semi-permeable membrane, osmosis over sufficient time allows lines of language and cultural literacy to be crossed, internalized and digested.

Posters well above eye-line mark the external fences of Kushida Shrine and ask passers-by "Haven't you forgotten something important?" These advertisements for the imperial system are the imposing tip of an ideological iceberg: the life-world that worships the trinity of Japanese ethnicity, language and culture.
Yamakasa is a sacred site for the true believers of this jigsaw of Japanese identity, and the responsibilities of participation are weights that are designed to avoid team injuries. Therefore respect for rules should not be tossed aside. Being introduced to the team decision-makers implies a personal guarantee from one's mentor that the new face will toe the line and do as they are told. Stories about Yamakasa reinforce the power of might to be always right; the spectacle of the macho intensities of team membership can curb the desire to shed the modern skin and participate in these physical Hakata prayers for good fortune.

Yamakasa is not some field trip where white guys can goof off as they masquerade as Japanese. Participating once is not likely to yield much in the way of deeper understanding. Being able to ride the rhythms of Yamakasa comes from the repetition of shared investments: showing up each year and doing what you are told.

Ideologies of race, words and actions, like icebergs, have their own sets of fun but thinking about walking into those tent headquarters for the first time makes me feel like a frog lost on a beach. My head spins, caught without a firm footing on the swirling sands of time. But there was one auspicious sign.

The larger-than-life doll that decorates our shrine is Hideyoshi, the sixteenth century warlord who used tea and noh politically. Under his patronage, Sen no Rikyū came to Hakata. In one memorable incident Rikyū served tea in the pine grove of Hakozaki. Each year I take Kyūshū University exchange students enrolled in my tea course to that site to demonstrate one distinctive tea serving procedure peculiar to the Nambō Ryū school of tea. A tea kettle hangs from a pine tree.
But You are right. Who am I trying to kid here? A kimono sleeve of tearoom tricks and being able to hum the melody of my favourite noh piece would not negate my obvious shortcoming. Cultural literacies, sure, on a good day, you pass. But zero Japanese ethnicity, do not pass go.

Two thirds of a trinity is no basis for grasping divinity.

**YAMAKASA EVENTS CALENDAR** [different layout, typeface]

**July 1-15** You are invited to inspect the *kazariyama*, which are shrine-floats designed for stationary display, at various locations around the city. You can enjoy the contrast between the heroic figures on the front of each float and the more light-hearted appearances of famous figures from Japanese pop culture (Doraemon!) at the back of each float. Most displays include detailed explanations, so please take some of the free Yamakasa information that will help you enjoy one of Japan’s top three festivals!

**July 1, afternoon Oshioitori 当番町のお汐井取り（東区箱崎浜）** Smart spectators line up early in the shade of pine trees to get the best view of the passing parade at Hakozaki Shrine. The supervising district team responsible for the smooth operation of Hakata Gion Yamakasa makes a solo run to Hakozaki Shrine and collects purifying sand that will protect the team and their households from injuries and other misfortunes.

**July 2-9** During this week, as you stroll around the areas near Kushida Shrine you can see the portable *kakiyama* shrines that will be carried by the *nagare* teams being assembled. Although not public events, training and *nagare* team meetings are visible around the *tsumesho* headquarters for the town districts comprising each *nagare* team. The gods are invited into each shrine-float.
**July 9, afternoon Oshioitori 各流のお汐井取り (東区箱崎浜)** You can enjoy the first big Yamakasa procession as each nagare team runs to the beach in front of Hakozaki Shrine, passing between the lines of pine trees. After runners collect enough purifying sand for themselves, their households and the nagare team, the runners are blessed at the altar of Hakozaki Shrine. Shrine officials offer runners rice wine and all town districts inside each nagare team hold their own small party in the streets surrounding Hakozaki Shrine. Refreshed by beer and light snacks, everyone makes a running return to their tsumesho headquarters.

**July 10, evening Nagaregaki 流舁 (各流の区域内) ※「ながれがき」と読む。** Now you can see the shrine-floats being carried around the team districts. By choosing a good location near the team boundaries, it is possible to see more than one nagare team in action on your way home from work. Certain rooftops are famous for operating as beer gardens that offer a good view and plenty of refreshment for Yamakasa supporters ...

**July 11, morning Asayama 朝山 (早朝、各流の区域内)** If you can take a little time before going to the office, try starting the day by watching the Asayama event. Watching Asayama will leave you charged up with energy, ready for the challenges of the day ahead.

**July 12, afternoon Oiyama Narashi 追い山馴し** If you can make it to Kushida Shrine by 10 am, you are in for a rare treat. The Nambo Ryū school serves ceremonial tea to the three gods of the main altar in a once-a-year ceremony. You can enjoy a bowl of whipped green tea later: tea and sweets are served to mortals from mid-morning to mid-afternoon. If you are lucky, you might share the bench with Yamakasa men who are getting their sugar-and-caffeine fix before hitting the road. Brace yourself
for the crowds drawn to the spectacle of all the shrine-floats being lined up outside Kushida Shrine, in a warm-up event for the July 15 climax. Please remember this rehearsal starts at 3:59 pm.

**July 13, afternoon Shudan Yamamise 集団山見せ** Another treat popular with the hundred of thousands out-of-town visitors who come for Yamakasa is the sight of floats being carried from Hakata to Fukuoka. Important men from local business and government sit atop the floats as they make a beeline for City Hall and back.

**July 14, evening Nagarekaki 流舁 (各流の区域内)** This is your last chance to see the nagare teams working inside their districts, co-ordinating their moves and fine-tuning the allocation of responsibilities. If you think you have had a hard day being a salary-man, watching the Nagarekaki after work will change your mind.

**July 15, morning Oiyama 追い山、山崩し、鎮めの能** Fast footwork and a knowledge of local streets is required if you are to see three different aspects of the Hakata Gion Yamakasa Festival. The main event begins at 4:59 am. Back in Kushida Shrine, the gods are placated by the performance of noh songs, dances and music that starts around 6 am. After the end of Oiyama, you are advised to stand back. The Nishi Nagare float is trashed as frenzied runners fight to take home fragments. By about 7 am, the melee is over and the victors proudly display their auspicious trophies that offer protection for the year ahead.

**Fukuoka Tourist Promotion Commission**

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR YAMAKASA PARTICIPANTS**

Participants must observe the traditions and rules that ensure the
smooth operation of Yamakasa. As representatives of our district, for the sake of the following generations, let's follow the fundamental standards of the manners and rules for the duration of Yamakasa.

Greetings

In the case of greeting your superiors or any Yamakasa office-holders, you must come to a complete stop. In a loud voice, you must clearly and distinctly perform your greeting.

Regardless of how friendly your personal relationships might be with your Yamakasa superiors, you are to address them by their ranking title. Do not use personal names. Even in the case of addressing higher ranking Yamakasa office-holders who are younger than you, you must use the honorific forms of respect language.

For the duration of Yamakasa, always be prepared to offer greetings to Yamakasa participants from other districts or nagare teams.

You are obliged to make courtesy calls to your guarantor who introduced you to this Yamakasa district. These greetings will be made three times: at the beginning of the year, before the beginning of Yamakasa, and after the end of Yamakasa. It is especially important that the greeting of the sixth month be addressed to your guarantor every year. The appropriate format for such phrases includes "Please give me the honour of participating in Yamakasa again this year."

Day One: July 9, afternoon Oshioitori

I heard the tsumesho before I could see it. The staccato of clipped greetings has a volume and intensity that puts me on guard as I approach the entrance to the white tents. Out front, I can hear a subtle competition
in these vocal performances. Who is the fastest to greet the older men who make the big decisions? Who is loudest? As the unranked young men with the blue and white headbands demonstrate their earnestness with their greetings, they are subject to the scrutiny of the *akatenogoi* men. These powerful men are fast thinkers, and their red headbands identify them as managers of the grunt of the float. The tangible authority in their voices and gaze is a force that dispels any urge for irony or critical distance. Stay in the moment.

Step inside the tent to officially greet the senior office-holders that I had met informally the week before. Everyone very welcoming, and someone I don’t know asks me "German Peter?" "Nein, ich heiße Tim und ich komme aus Noko." A few laughs. I’ll be OK with this crew.

Gentlemen’s clubs have dress regulations. Item 5 of the Yamakasa code of conduct displayed in the *tsumesho* advises against being naked: wear your *mizuhappi* jacket. No problem.

I imagined Item 5 meant that once you get the split-toed shoes and leggings on, you put the *mizuhappi* on before getting wrapped up in your loincloth. Wrong.

When Yamakasa was banned by a government obsessed with western
modernization in 1872, there were two points of contention. The first issue was the decorated floats, and the second problem was the spectacle of men in loincloths running through Hakata. The primitive presence of these bare torsos was not a good look for the business centre. When Yamakasa was permitted to be fully revived a decade later, runners avoided the charge of nakedness by wearing *mizuhappi* coats. The local tradition overcame central government attempts to interfere with their communal worship of Hakata gods. *Mizuhappi* have become an integral part of the material culture of Yamakasa and are instantly recognizable Hakata icons.

The meaning of naked has historical nuances that are not obvious on the first reading of the Instructions for Yamakasa Participants. Butt-naked believers became an issue again when Yamakasa was going to make its debut on foreign soil as part of the 1980 Aloha Week Festival in Honolulu. Delicate American sensibilities were not ready for authentic displays of Japanese manhood against the backdrop of Waikiki palm trees. Discussions were stalled until a leading member of the Fukuoka JC delegation made a rhetorical gesture towards the historical figure of King Kamehameha, the late eighteenth century ruler who united four tribes of the Hawaiian islands. If the loincloth is good enough for one man, good enough for all men.

These days the orthodox dressing sequence tends to start with putting on five-toed socks for superior grip. Followed by split-toed shoes, leggings, loincloth, a protective charm draped over one shoulder, stomach wrap, and finally, the *mizuhappi* coat that identifies your town district and *nagare* team affiliation. The district headband is draped over the shoulders until the start of official business.
When Item 5 of the Yamakasa code of conduct warns against being *hadaka*, it doesn’t mean naked. *Hadaka* means bare-chested.

The first day out is a team run. A chance to practice that appropriate running style that is not jogging, but a lower action. More like a fast noh shuffle with the feet barely off the ground. Arms straight by the sides with only minimal swing reduces the chances of accidentally elbowing a colleague. *Oshioitori* is more than the time to learn to run, learning to run and chant at the same time. Moving in the pack is also an opportunity to look around and identify team members and supervisors by the back of their heads or their individuated styling of the team uniform. Later in the week there will be jokes about hair implants.

This peripheral sense of who is where becomes critical once the shrine-float starts moving. Even the voices of the runners help everyone keep the men in their place. Performing Hakata Te Ippon when standing still is a chance to feel the group energy and the running chant releases that power into furious action. Keeping track of the gang is the basis for being able to perform the assigned duties amidst the hurly-burly.

On the way out to the beach and back there are plenty of breaks. Time to listen, learn...
about the Hakata past, and chat. My favourite section is the bridge stop. One particular bridge more than halfway home, decorated with sculptures of lanterns funded by anonymous and unknowing taxpayers, marks the point where the good will of previous generations of Yamakasa men descend into the glowing lanterns that are carried by the children at the front of the pack. With the passion of those who have gone on before us lighting our way, under their protection the sheen of our sweat fades as we make our dusk return to the tsunesho.

The mantra of our chanting evaporates the bitumen beneath our feet. Telegraph poles (the neat anachronism of their name gives mobile phone power users a wry smile) and the electrical lines that limited the height of Your shrines, these symbols of modernization that obstructed our worship, vanish, consumed by our steady progress. Each step forward drives us deeper in the past. Freed of these obstacles that cramped our communal style of beliefs in action, the dusty streets submit to the nostalgic melody of our unremitting footsteps.

As we follow the lead of the light of the lanterns, the pace of the pack releases long forgotten intensities. The 1872 fury at Yamakasa being banned until 1883 generates local waves of action that fought against the tide of national development.

The establishment of a telegraph station in Hakata in 1872 marked the start of a long storm of modern progress. Electrical power lines carving up the town in 1897, the 1899 proliferation of telephone lines. When hand-made tradition faced down industrial technology, the first wave of backwash came in 1892. Hakata town representatives were organized, gathering monies from the community to fund the necessary construction costs and
negotiating with officials for the removal of obstacles to shrines that exceeded ten metres.

Recalling the image of a sixteen metre shrine from 1871 fuels the tempo of our strides across the mythological territory of a battle between Hakata gods and the modern nation. As the shrines collided with telegraph poles, the first casualty was the distinction between the telegraph, the telephone and electricity. Wires of all kinds took the path of least resistance, yielding to the blunt insistence of Your tradition to mark the boundaries of its sacred sites. The official response was to limit the height of shrines to 2.7 metres in 1898, lifting that restriction to 3.3 metres in 1905.

As Your agent, tradition sidesteps these constrictions by establishing a new event. In 1897, fifteen metre floats tickled the sky above Kushida Shrine. With the installation of the Fukuoka tram system in 1910 these so-called sueyama 据え山 floats became the kazariyama that are now displayed across the city. The kakiyama shrines that are carried around the Yamakasa courses tend to be around seven metres in height.

The birth of such genres occurs in the wake of Your tradition. The central government aspiration for social order fails to contain the groundswell of Hakata innovation. The vitality of Hakata establishes the distinction between static kazariyama and dynamic kakiyama, makes a quotation of its own history, before collapsing the distinction between shrines that are displayed and shrines that move.

The 1910 shrine of Doi nagare team co-opts historical forces and the decoration of that float features a portion of a tram. The wires of the tram system might have limited the height of Yamakasa floats but the festival incorporates an image of modern progress that which seeks to constrain
local tradition. In 1964, for the first time in half a century the kazariyama of Kami Kawabata performs the prestigious Kushida Iri entrance to Kushida Shrine. Three years later the Kami Kawabata shrine is allocated the position of Float Number Eight, its kazariyama entering Kushida Shrine after the previous seven nagare teams. Each year crowds inside Kushida Shrine enjoy the extravagant decorations of the Kami Kawabata shrine on July 12 and 15.

Our bodies reverberate with memories of those emotions that powered a passion for the visual excesses of shrines. Each step a blind commitment to do what must be done. Under the repetition of our strides, the parched surface that has not even dreamt of a car quivers in gratitude as perspiration falls. The rhythm of our run turns back the clock. Multistory apartment buildings revert to wooden shop fronts as we romp past grateful merchants. Against the blur of signs announcing local produce, our efforts to serve You are artisan pride. Our tradition of skills attained through repetition, and sustained by more repetition and dreams of the perfection of forms. Practice is the theory that sustains a belief in the here-and-now existing as the ever-after. Our arteries sustain Your tradition and we are gratefully exhilarated by this honour.

So, ancient Yamakasa spirits, what is the ritual moment of Your modern Japanese now? A procession lead by a bunch of cute kids, one of whom struggles to hold the team signboard upright as he runs, crosses town. Chanting
teams of loin-clothed men pass under the postwar tangle of electric wires, their voices echoing between glass canyons as helicopters hovering overhead beam live coverage to air-conditioned studios. Our destination: a shrine dedicated to a warring god in the descent flight path of Fukuoka International Airport.

**Day Two: July 10, evening Nagarekaki**

It feels like a safe distance, until the drum is struck. The moving castle howls. The sacredness of time begins now.

Masses of men stream ahead of the shrine-float. Everyday routines are discarded as Your extraordinary ritual begins. A glimpse of the frenzied faces bolting past swims out of focus, intensifying my fear of Your unknown forces. The scale of the approaching float is grasped by dumb eyes that stare but cannot comprehend the logic of Your power over Hakata men.

Placating the malevolent bile of angered gods, the momentum of the float slays any aspiration for an objective account. Narrative is trampled by the desperate concentration of men staking their reputation and the safety of their fellows on their well-practised ability not to stumble.

Fast footwork is the foundation for participation but true believers shed the skin of their shoulders, ears and palms as gravity and friction compete with the insistence of the shrine to advance. The desire to perform to Your satisfaction unites the runners in moments of convulsive communication. Lactic acid burbles as rationality lays stunned, little more than philosophical road kill. The urge to belong to the local chapter of a sacred national identity is transmuted into the screaming prayer of every
stretched nerve, demanding enough stamina to go the distance.

Ranking and being ranked gives each man the right to stand, rice straw rope held aloft at the designated changeover, eyeballing the distance being consumed by the sacramental float. A brief riot of testosterone as entropy reigns. Well-intended slaps between the shoulder blades mark the end of one section of duties. If these imperatives are ignored, foul invective for any laggards obstructing the fresh runners anxious to fuel Your relentless demands for progress.

The retired men fall back, the shrine charges deeper into its own mythology, and the heaving runners take a short cut to their next station of duty. Whipped into Your submission by their exertion, they feel miraculously alive. Blood remembers this bliss of achievement. A quick glance confirms all are present as they jog towards the next leg of service. Your potent cocktail of adrenalin and fatigue will sustain Hakata for another year.

**Day Three: July 11, morning Asayama**

I thought I was awake when I arrived at the *tsumesho* tent around 2 am. The right legging on the left leg. No, try the right legging on the right leg. This time inside out. Being drowsy in the morning becomes dizzy, spinning slowly as three meters of canvas girds the waist. An old hand behind me gives the loincloth the final reefing of the knot that lifts me off the ground, even as I bend my knees to get lower. I slip the 500 yen Kushida Shrine charm over my left shoulder and the man of experience wraps the white linen stomach band around me. More spinning but with constriction. With constriction comes ... argh ... concentration. Breathing from the
The calluses of his hands persuade the two ends of the linen cloth into a neat rope that he ties off and tucks out of the way. Daggy bits swinging out is not a good look, and may cause an accident. He shows me how to tie the mizuhappi so that the name of the district remains visible on the lapels. Vertical granny knot.

I am left to wrestle the rice straw rope into the back of my off-white loincloth. Goodbye to the confusion of dealing with the intricacies of leggings: "Oh that right leg. Thank you for your assistance." Exertion arrives before the kakinawa rope is persuaded into position. Bristling with the stubborn persistence of the desire to be harvested that has sustained life on the archipelago, straw scratches the skin of many runners.

The roughly hand-woven rope speaks of how the soil of flooded fields bonded generations of rural communities. Feast is the best antidote for famine. The blind fear of hunger demands that the petty differences of village life be subsumed by sweat shared in the sowing and harvesting of staple grains. Frightening tales of that dull ache lasting for months drive farmers to dream of the harmony of full bellies and well-stocked storehouses.

Knowing how to generate the rhythms that unifies the intent of the team, that is the magic of rice straw communication. The tenacious grip of such ropes on the cedar beams of Your shrine makes it the lifeline that turns our passion into your power. Once the mountain moves, it knows no reverse.

Finally dressed, I am awake and the enjoying the brisk air and the subdued camaraderie outside the tent. Kids clowning around in the car.
park are quietly cautioned. 4:30 and decent people are still asleep. The weight of our responsibility and the depth of darkness merge. We silently fall into our positions for the meeting that begins with an emphasis of the importance of safety and a reminder of the course details.

Everyone knows that today is the event for children. Girls and boys from the supervising district have a once-in-a-lifetime right to sit up on the shrine as it careers around their neighbourhood. On that enclosed platform, above the men who wear pure white linen *hanten* jacket without any town insignia, these kids get the ride of their life in the best seats in the house. Protected by three men in front and three men behind who sit on the narrow benches, the children bask in the subdued glow of the pride of these older men.

Asayama is also a highlight for all the older men, and not merely those men chosen to have the honour of sitting on Your shrine. These selected sixes take their turns on the benches, conducting the raging surges of power with their red *teppō* batons. After clambering up over the cedar beams, these *dai agari* men are the eye of the storm. Co-ordinating the voices and legs of the runners working under the supervision of the red
headband *akatenogoi* men, the more competent *dai agari* men exude a certain grace as they wave their batons in unison. Scrambling off the shrine is more an issue of time and safety, rather than the rehearsed luxury of aesthetics. The mobile mosh pit prepares to catch *dai agari* men on their descent to the steady road.

Asayama has a freer system of turn allocation than the July 12 Oiyama Narashi and July 15 Oiyama events. A slap on the back tells you your run is over, and the older men have eyes that are as wild as they were two decades ago. The ghosts of these former powerhouses emerge from the murky pre-dawn frenzy. Age does not weary them as the economy of their experience tramples the demons of complacency. The repetition of their mature perfection is the textbook that burns itself into the desire of their young followers. Blazing prestige inspires the hopes of judgement and evaluation.

We’re off and the children dispel the darkness with their lanterns. Lagging at the back of the pack, plunged into darkness in the shadow of an office tower as lanterns race around a corner. Peer into the gloom as the stubborn clamour of runners lapses into a faint echo. Caught in this well of flawed sound, I am pinned by the gaze of the past. From somewhere deeper than the ancestor roots of rice, history sees me as its target. Or subject.

A frog, a real frog. Not a metaphorical frog caught in quicksand between the tides of history. A tiny frog that knows nothing of the ocean dodges the marching columns advancing on foreign soil. The smooth skin of fresh-faced kids cannot conceal the most profound wish of their unsoldierly hearts. They want to grow up to be good men, running a little store that sells fermented beans to the sisters of their childhood sweet-
hearts. Or passing the family farm onto the next generation. The straight grain of their character means that there is nowhere to run or hide.

Marching is the only option. Struggling to maintain their innocent posture under the burden of national demands, their hearts are crushed. Humanism is dead as they shoulder their weapons, consumed by the bleakest desires of every nation. Hope lays slain, a corpse dressed up in the radiant rhetoric of ritual.

Hail fellow, well met. Artillery rains down with the indiscriminate wrath of an angered god as the perfunctory veneer of civilization is stripped off. Once the rage of divinity is unleashed, individual demands for explanation, justification or legitimation are the first casualties to be sacrificed on the altars of sovereign states. Forget the mild discomforts of feast or famine, and the quaintly intoxicated joys of autumn harvest celebrations. Necessity demands that each cell worships one imperative. Devour, or be eaten.

A trace of the tempo of the runners fades. Distant voices shout desperate orders. A reflection shimmers in a shop window.

A stripped-down shrine, almost bereft of decoration, charges ahead. It is the third year of the Enlightened Peace, 1928. The bright-faced lads of the 24th Regiment of the Fukuoka Infantry are having fun during the Yamakasa season. Each company has made their own float and they are competing against each other. The people of Hakata are out, enjoying the show as if it were a legitimate part of Yamakasa, noisily casting buckets of cooling water onto the churning legs of the soldiers.

The shop-front sheen of that double-glazed window erases any memory of the destruction indiscriminately unleashed on victor and victim alike.
The 1888 Yamakasa shrine display that featured a faux infantryman implies a certain position on international matters of state. Other military images connected with the 1894 outbreak of hostilities with China appear in the decoration of Your Yamakasa shrines. Japanese interests in the Korean peninsula frame the decline of the old order of China and Korea with the emerging power of Russian and Japan. During the 1904 war between Japan and Russia, the Japanese government dedicated Yamakasa expenses to the family of men in military service, treating these donations as military expenditure. After their military victory in Mukden, a Fukuoka regiment dubbed the Manshū Yamakasa performed an abbreviated version of Yamakasa rites on the Chinese continent.

The iceberg of that barbaric era sinks off the screen. Repressed out of sight by a desolate urge to know only the now. Overcome by communal euphoria, this purely exhilarating moment is seized by the bestial past of all state militia. In our moment of blissful unknowing, the irrational magic of ritual is a smokescreen for modernist dreams of superiority.

Our collective memories betray the past we have sworn to transmit. The future has cannibalized that tradition, our precious invention that conceals from us its subterranean investments. Blinded by our colonizing of those soils blessed by the gods of others, everything we feel is already tainted by the silt of recall.

To experience is to be pillaged by memory that sells us down the river. A selected array of doctored spin that justifies the present is a seduction, hawking the blue sky of a future that features us. Front and centre, we feel larger than life because we are the modern spirit of progress. We fall into the well of our own imagining. Our only wish is to become our fantasy. We
want to be our ideals, images of authentic beauty.

Standing in the summer shade of Hakata seven decades ago, armed with a bucket, and a hoarse voice numb to the sacrifices soon to be demanded by all nations, in that one raucous instant there is only one truth banging in my veins. For the duration of Your festival, I am so grateful to be Japanese.

I try separating the pleasures of trust in the nation, the charms of local identity, and our universal needs for sacramental beliefs as action. No luck. This fictocritical tale maps the male pleasures of festival power. It flits from the different voices of "I", sifting through the logic of closure that gives this Hakata identity a gendered identity. So far so good.

Once identity becomes a sacrament, however, the distinctions between local, national and divine melt into a reflexive solipsism. Sustaining identity and culture requires a dialogue between the sameness of Us and the difference of Them. Caught in between the territory of local gods and the divine nation, we must all be together. Once armed by this communal body that permits little internal diversity, the dialectic of difference inhibits an open relationship with any foreign Them-ness.

Taking the local joy out of national pride, and retrieving divine grace from local alternatives to national culture? Easier to count individual sakura petals as they scatter, powerless before the driving fury of spring gales.
Lost in the depth of a well too broad to fathom, the subconscious of the past sucks any light from the fetid air. A blind frog hops across dreamy chunks of fresh mud, jumping from one ocean to another, oblivious to what bobs up in the aftermath of each expedition.

In the June 19 air strike of 1945, it took 221 B-29s about two hours to reduce the glories of the material culture of Hakata to piles of smouldering ash. Less than two months before atomic bombs are unleashed twice on war-weary citizens, Yamakasa is not held. Running through the pre-dawn darkness, seeking those leading lanterns, defiance sustains enough persistence for another step. Playing catch-up. In May 1946 the children's Yamakasa is held, along with the Dontaku parade. The Kushida Iri portion of Yamakasa is revived in 1948, and a local organization is established in 1949 to ensure the survival of the Yamakasa festival. The past is a force propelling me forwards toward the light.

A corner is turned and the light of dawn stuns me. The team re-units as an old timer reminds the youngsters to all stay in formation. I fall into unison with the chanting fray. The prayer of our feet turns the earth faster, towards the sun.

Our frenetic mortality pauses as the shrine stops in front of a memorial altar. A funerary portrait and the selected effects of the Hakata doll artisan who devoted his career to supplying the decorations for our float is surrounded by his surviving relatives and apprentices. A wave of appreciation swells as the nagare team leader addresses the man who passed away three months earlier. The voice of our leader wavers as he recalls several amusing incidents, punctuating them with his tears.

Hideyoshi, the sixteenth century warlord who developed Hakata by
splitting it into seven districts that are the basis of the *nagare* team system today, stares at the black and white photograph of the doll maker. This imposing effigy of Hideyoshi has a fearful presence. This figure is the last doll made by our deceased artisan.

As a sign of respect our headbands are undone, draped around our necks. We sing our song of celebration, ”Iwaimedeta”, and perform the Te Ippon chant in thanks for the dedication of the doll-maker to our annual penance. Sweet bean buns are handed out and sake sipped out of a commemorative cedar cup has the fragrance of a life well lived. The shrine is swung in the shape of the curved の character in the *yama yusuri* movement. The 追善山 ritual for the repose of that honoured soul is complete.

Headband retied and back into the flow. One district leader spots the team representative who made the greetings. Time out for a little cut and thrust, Hakata style. ”You did well. I always knew you were an actor. But with your face, those farewell greetings you made this morning, that is the pinnacle of your career. You’ll never be famous!” Another senior office holder from a different district chimes in with ”Maybe a few TV advertisements, if you’re lucky!” A local business figure has the last word. His neatly trimmed moustache twitches. He smirks. He speaks. ”Don’t call us. We’ll call you.” TKO. All laugh goodheartedly and melt back into the mass of runners following Your shrine.

Later in the course we pass another smaller memorial altar that the family have installed in front of their shop. Fewer people stop in front of the black and white photograph of the deceased man for the sweet buns and alcohol offered. The relatives smile as they acknowledge the quick bows
made by those office-bearers who can’t leave their stations.

Fresh from this morning devotion, I skip the post-run meeting that offers snacks and drink as celebration. Salaryman on a mission, I head off to the subway, primed to face the day: breakfast on the run, a shower at the factory to wash off the residue of the recent past, followed by two classes and two meetings.

Down the grey corridor, I carry the memory of the rice straw rope with me. Earth, season, and community, all sustained by the labour of rice culture. The wisdom of humility in the face of unmastered natural forces can’t save me from the modern insanity of meetings.

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR YAMAKASA PARTICIPANTS**

At the naorai venue, please sit down after your superior office-bearers have sat down.

People without designated responsibilities should sit down promptly. For the duration of the naorai celebration, let’s keep the mindset of not muddling around.

In the case of serving drinks to your superiors, it is necessary to use both hands. In the case of serving beer, the label should be facing upwards.

For the area around your seat, especially when men hold a rank superior to you, should any glasses be less than half-full, please take the initiative by having the intention to pour first.

Depending on the situation, as common etiquette, when someone offers you a return glass, be prepared to respond by accepting.

In the case of visitors from another district, please follow the above
guidelines, irrespective of their rank.

Once the Hakata Te Ippon chant has been performed, immediately commence tidying up the *tsumesho*. Should your superiors still be drinking, commence cleaning up from a different section of the tent.

In the case of the designated members having commenced washing up, all assigned tables, benches and chairs inside the *tsumesho* must be straightened up. The area must be cleaned and any garbage put out.

The cups, plates, etc. used during *naorai* are the valued property of our town district and should therefore be handled with an appropriate level of care and respect.

**Day Four: July 12, afternoon Oiyama Narashi**

My guts are churning. Lined up outside Kushida Shrine and getting ready to run and push. A definite promotion from running and chanting with the pack, I get one dress rehearsal with the stationary shrine and one piece of advice. Keep your head down as you push. If the shrine should suddenly come to a complete stop because its leg catches a dip in the road, and you have your head up, you could be in for some surprise dental work. Five or six metres of cedar, about fifteen centimeters in diameter, would not be a welcome addition to the lower mandible.

Starting to fry in the sun. Looking up at the shrine fires up a different performance anxiety from going on a noh stage. Most injuries sustained while performing in front of a chanting chorus of respected teachers tend to be temporary afflictions that dent one individual reputation.

Running with the big boys means accepting the possibility of injuring oneself and others. I can’t tag along on the hallowed Seidō path of the
Kushida Iri leg of the race because I have to bolt ahead with my baby sitter.

I am just a country bumpkin from an island, overawed by the buildings. Once I turn two corners in the concrete jungle, I am lost. Left or right, past or present, urban vertigo gobbles these distinctions. Having someone check that I make it to the designated stage saves me considerable anxiety. I was hoping to do something useful after about three years of turning up, not within the first week.

In the afternoon sun, the rhythm of Oiyama Narashi resembles sumo. We stand around, sweating. Seven shrines lined up outside Kushida Shrine and our Number Four shrine moves about one hundred metres at a time. Incrementalism, as the countdown has started. More waiting, another hundred metre dash. Plus the scary half-metre where Your shrine decides if it really want to come to a complete stop. The *dai agari* men look to have a tenuous grip on reality as the momentum remembers that it is a law unto itself. White knuckles grip the narrow bench. During this warm-up of twenty second sprints framed by ten minutes of not talking, most men look as tense as athletes three minutes before the start of a triathlon. The well-designed format gives everyone a chance to focus on
the event ahead of us. Mind and body, individual and team, all must come together.

Wives and girlfriends make brief guest appearances wishing their partners a safe return. It is almost a shock to realize that men are not the world. The intensity of our engagement with the task ahead dwarfs the rest of the world. Caught in the well of our obsession with danger, performance and status, we forget alternative ways of dancing to the Yamakasa groove. Women of a certain generation would escape the summer heat by taking in a couple of double features at a Nakasu cinema before emerging for the morning Yamakasa rites.

When our team runs into Kushida Shrine I've learnt more about how to make a useful contribution by watching the routines of other districts and nagare teams. Bolting along in front of Your shrine feels like eight in the morning on the seventh of July in Pamplona, celebrating the festival of San Fermin by running in front of Spanish bulls. One slip and the festive atmosphere is over.

We run past the designated changeover point and have to back track as the shrine approaches. Not an auspicious beginning. At fifty metres the float looks ominous. At twenty metres the whites of the eyes of the runners have a most peculiar intensity, like weary bulls pacing towards their final moments of truth with matadors. When the shrine is ten metres back, most men look as if they don't have enough energy left to make any judgements of distance.

Changeover. We wade in, slapping and barging towards our designated positions. Two people duck in front of me as they wrangle their ropes over the second beam. Better them than me. I have my left hand on the second
beam and my right palm on the third beam. Remember to start on the same foot at everyone else and keep your head down.

Take-off is surprisingly smooth. Voices and legs working in time. I scan the about a metre in front of my feet, looking for any surprises. If it was on my bicycle commute route I would be fine but as the Stranglers sing it, I'm just a peasant in the big city. I wish I was a local who grew up here, instinctively knowing the dips and manhole covers of each street.

Taking the cue from the runner in front of me, small steps and plenty of them is the desired tempo. As we shove with each chant, there is a wonderful illusion that it is us getting this one ton monument to charge down the line. Pushing Hideyoshi around Hakata, this is fun.

Someone has put both of his hands over my left hand, and the schoolboy who has been doing Yamakasa since he was a baby has not located the knot of my loincloth. Lost in the crowd? Improvisations happen.

I am belted on the back. My arms go up as I edge away from the shrine. Smooth exit. I survived. Exhilaration. That was fun. We fall into a group and head for the next stage. A quick assessment of how it went by the red headband \textit{akatenogoi}. Time for a couple of rehearsals before the float arrives.

Practice doesn't make perfect. Runners from the previous block get caught up as we charge in. The slapping assumes a different intensity as these panting obstacles are shouldered out of the way. Having managed a straight line in the narrow side street, out on the big city boulevard with its shady trees, we are fishtailing down the road like a drunk seventeen year old prat in his first stolen car. About two thirds of the way through our section and it feels like we are running on empty. The experienced hand on
beams one and two shouts out for more effort and gets it from the rest of us.

   Head down, hands up, going like the clappers on the second of three runs. The interesting thing about Yamakasa is that you can think "Oh no, I'm gonna spew." But you don't. Lungs fade to grey but the legs keep hammering. Maybe another ten seconds. I think I can, I think I can. Thanks Mum, that bedtime story saved me.

   Getting over to the final stage is a major challenge. Where did all the oxygen go? All of the pre-Yama jogging doesn't seem to have prepared me for the intensity of these twenty or thirty second bursts, followed by the six hundred metre treks to the next station. No chance for recovery. By the time we line up to be doused by water, I can stand upright again. Some guys like to wet that spot below the side of their knees but I'm feeling hot-headed. A half-bucket of heaven on the steaming scalp.

   The final leg is down hill. Push, do not lift are the instructions for the engine at the back of the shrine. Directions even I can follow. Right now, even the idea of lifting belongs in the realm of the anaerobically impossible. Any lift from behind and the shrine might flip, especially if one of the front legs develops an attraction for a manhole.

   Changeover is smooth but our main man, the red headband in the middle, has been unavoidably detained. Suddenly he swoops into position, everyone packs down like a formidable rugby scrum and we dive down the narrow hill. Third time lucky. No wasted energy, nor the embarrassment of abstract doodles across the course that draws stinging words of advice from the crowds.

   This is living. Hideyoshi nods in approval.
Day Five: July 13, afternoon Shudan Yamamise

Your rites gleam with the magic of the modern state. The conservative repetition of Your worship sediments the past onto our community body, assisted by the bond of municipal taxes.

City Hall helped put Yamakasa on the map, and City Hall is the target for today’s course. From the mid-1930s, Fukuoka Tourist Agency published a series of Yamakasa postcards. In 1937, Fukuoka City Council donated 3,000 yen to assist the construction of shrines for six nagare teams.

In the struggle between local identity and national narrative, once more the tide turned against the colourful variations of the Hakata cultural sphere. In the early nineteen forties, the anti-fun brigade of the central government banned a series of postcards published by the Tourist Promotion Section of City Hall. Lightly comic dialogues in the distinctive Hakata-ben dialect accompanied by a brief explanation of the characteristics of local speech were deemed to be injurious to public morals and the efforts to unite citizens during the Fifteen Year War. Unlike the Hakata Matsubayashi festival which was banned in 1938, the efforts of Yamakasa advocates meant the shrines were permitted to move on July 11, 12 and 15. There were only two exceptions to this abbreviated Yamakasa calendar. In April 1938, a visiting Italian delegation of Axis allies was presented with the spectacle of an out-of-season performance of the Kushida Iri portion of Yamakasa. A 1944 request from the Western Division of Japanese Military Command resulted in Yamakasa co-operating with the September production of the film Rikugun, "Army".

Once the iceberg of international hatred begins to diminish near the end of the Cold War, the governments of Fukuoka City and Fukuoka
Prefecture endorse the representative status of the Hakata Yamakasa Gion festival. As principal donors for the Yamakasa expedition to Hawaii in 1980, taxpayer funds were a significant proportion of the 4,734,000 yen raised.

Sustained by our fetish of Yamakasa fabric, time warps. The neatly irreversible time that powers narratives of national headway is stalled by the social world of Yamakasa.

Lifetime careers at the intersection of annual cycles and mythic antiquities consummate the union of the quick and the dead. Anchored within the structure marked by the tribal codes of mizuhappi coats, promotion is calibrated by the incremental acquisition of certain fabrics. Neat hierarchies of threads of different colours are the currency of an economy that divides and weaves the Hakata community body, elevating the most dedicated souls to positions of responsibility.

The calendar of our Yamakasa trek from shrine to shrine, past temples, suppresses digital experiences of time. The illusion of cultural identity is conjured by sprains and grazes. Contentedly wallowing in our sweat, consciousness forgets that cul-
ture is not true. Or false.

We pant our way through structures of exhaustion. We embrace the shikitari rules and conventions that structure our passionate actions, taking pride in the extent to which the dead control us. Nationalism might have come to the end of its road but we plod on unthinkingly past a consideration of the politics of time.

The right to self-determination is not totally surrendered. Some of the older men are absent for today's run, believing that any expedition beyond the physical boundaries of Hakata is merely a vulgar display for tourists. Yamakasa as doing, yes. Showing, no.

**Day Six:** July 14, evening Nagarekaki

Safety and hierarchy are the two items on the agenda of our orientation meeting. With these explicit and implicit themes joined, we fall in and head off towards our team shrine. At the first corner we stop, clapping in time with the chant of men from another district as they run past. We assume our place in the queue and follow them, resuming our running chant. Stop, start. Stop, start. The closer we get to the shrine, the stronger the contrast between rest and activity.

In the silence of waiting, the initial roar from the front of our district starts our charge. Hearts jolt. The whole team, comprised of groups from each district, is lined up. Mass responsibility. In turn, each group approaches the front of the shrine. The runners remove their headbands and drape them around their necks. We perform the Hakata Te Ippon chant.

"Ready! Clap, clap. Once more! Clap, clap. Three cheers, clap, clap, clap." Headbands back on, and a quick running chant as we scuttle around
to the back of the shrine. In the congested side street, each performance is scrutinized by men from other districts. Headbands are off again as our district joins together in our second Te Ippon chant. We make way for the next district.

More silent waiting. Stationary bodies, jumping hearts, as everyone prepares for the adventure of moving out.

In the harsh glare of reality, we do our level best, knowing that the euphoria of the Yamakasa present is a trap and a gate. Our hearts are caught by a tradition that cannot be surpassed. All the anecdotal evidence reminds us that the inherent superiority of the past is an inevitable truth.

Our actual deeds are too fresh with the sheen of the present. The rawness of real incidents cannot shine until what we have done is filtered into a future where our now has become a tradition. Once burnished with the attentive gloss of storytelling, our destined mode of participation, forever coming up short against the measure of a heroic past, is lifted out of the darkness of the hearts of men.

We follow those that have led the way from the time when there was no line keeping the dark of night outside from invading the turbid soul. In time, we become the leaders of the next generation of followers. Caught in the present, in the instant of running to the absolute limits of our hearts, lungs and legs, we glance with gratitude for a past that guarantees our safety, knowing that our present belongs to the future.
We live our now for the future. Staying in the moment is the eternal demand of such traditions. Grasp the Yamakasa present to feel something divine.

At the end of the day, after the modest celebration and cleaning up the tsumesho, we peel off the leggings, split-toed shoes, and five-toed socks. As any adrenalin-buzzed snowboarder will confess after a hard day on the mountain, that instant of release, when the confines of footwear are shed, is like heaven on earth.

**Day Seven: July 15, morning Oiyama**

4:58 a.m. "One minute to go!" This announcement deepens the wave of anticipation that has been slowly building during the countdown. Excitement is drenched by a short sharp shower of rain. An instant of silent disbelief becomes something other than applause. Shrieks of despair rend the air. Persistent spectators have been standing in prime positions outside Kushida Shrine, protecting their turf since before the midnight drizzle started. We stand shivering in typhoon rain. Ambassadors of an age when matter had enough mind to drive foreboding into the hearts of men, we wonder how this all looks on cathode ray tubes, in the dry comfort of living rooms across the nation.

We are shrine Number Four so a few of us slink off into the spectator stands. The public address system of Kushida Shrine booms once at five minute intervals. The drum is struck three times and three floats power past with formidable speed. The roar of the crowd seated inside Kushida Shrine reverberates with approval when each shrine wheels around and speeds out onto Hakata streets. A heart-rending groan tells everyone
standing outside in the rain that the transition was not perfect.

"Ten seconds to go!" The leader of our district looks down from the
crow's nest platform at the entrance to Kushida Shrine, taking in the
spectacle of the shrines lined up between masses of spectators. One year of
preparation disappears as he gives the amplified drum a decisive whack.
Number Four is inside Kushida Shrine. The exhilaration of the final run
means the front of the shrine is riding high. The fierce gaze of Hideyoshi
pierces further into the future as the decisive turn is approached. Once we
hear the roar of approval, fired up, we start running for the first of our
four designated stations.

The memory of these four sections will prick our everyday compla-
cency for the rest of the year. Heads down and working together, toiling as
one, this is addictive action. Pushing aside demons of individual anxieties
about personal limitations, the spell of Yamakasa links the hearts of those
fuelling Your shrine. Each step in the right direction is aquantam leap for
the belief in actions that protect the community from disasters and
misfortune. Your shrine floats on the sweating rage of men as hopes melt
fear, burning a furrow forward.

The float ploughs across the bitumen, the smell of the bronze caps that
fit the feet of the shrine fires up the chanting throats. Historical questions
about whether your father attacked Papua New Guinea from the north or
defended the Kokoda Trail from the south melt in the flurry of footwork.
White-knuckled grips on the sharply twisted rice straw rope squeeze some
weight out of the shrine as men do their level best to make this moment
burn beyond the soles of their feet.

This passionate unity of roaring men and spectators who clap, cheer or
are struck mute by the bedlam unleashed, this is the divinity that has sustained seven centuries of lapping Hakata. Death, disease and uncertainties are dispelled in this moment of absolute now. Each stride is a victory for human will. Modern technology supplies distractions and temporary remedies but Yamakasa acknowledges the underlying reality of the mortality of the human condition.

Death is embraced as fatigued runners are pushed and slapped out of the way by those more energetic. The prayer of collective action, each heartbeat a nanosecond that sustains the power of Hakata legends, becomes the compulsion driving all to excel, subsist, and fade. The community accepts this cycle, drawing together as generations spar with a volcanic flow of time that consumes all in its path. Eventually.

A crowd gathers in front of a Kushida Shrine stage that has hosted a variety of performances in the past fortnight. A brief pause for one memorable instance of incomprehension from what feels like a lifetime ago, but the calendar marks this interval as four mornings: Yamakasa runners emerge from the gloom of early morning, having performed their official greeting at the Kushida altar. Entering the audience area, they are momentarily stunned out of their men-only mentality by the sinuous performances of a local Hawaiian dance troupe. Poise is rattled by relief as women almost compete to leave the stage at the end of their set, ready to sprint to the offstage anonymity of darkness.

The last event of the final morning is about bring the curtain down on Kushida Shrine for another year. As the sound of noh drums and a flute being tested offstage filters to the audience seating, people make dignified haste towards the programmes being distributed at the front of the stage.
before returning to their seats. As the Shirabe warm-up finishes, members of the audience settle into a more formal posture. Straighter backs and feet pointing towards the stage signal the readiness of the audience to receive auspicious god plays. Other people gratefully slump in their chairs, exhausted by the all-night demands of witnessing community commitment. Rewarded by deep alpha waves, they sleep.

*Okina* is chanted. *Takasago* is danced to the accompaniment of music and chanting. The dynamic *Funabenke* dance concludes the programme. The *hayashi kata* musicians leave the stage. Their callused hands and joints aching from the manual labour of calming gods are numb to audience applause.

The *shizumu* noh has placated the gods but in the territory of Nishi *nagare*, the Reisen district team is preparing to demolish their team shrine. The shrine is placed at a four way intersection and we wade through the district teams that have cordoned off the area. Preventing innocent by-standers from being injured in the mayhem about to unfold is a serious responsibility. One of my seniors gestures for me to move back, out of the impact zone.

The Hakata Te Ippon chant is performed and the instant it finishes the brawling commences. Team members compete against each other for prestigious parts of the shrine. It is not exactly K-1 boxing but the Marquis of Queensbury would not be edified by the spectacle of young men clawing each other, trying to hinder the ascent of their team mates. Everyone wants a piece of Hideyoshi and the possibility of his head in the palm of your hand is certainly worth the gamble of a few tumbles onto the cedar beams.
One or two unlucky fighters slip down, feet pointing towards the already steaming sky in an agonizing instant extended by the clamour of spectators. The beams wait, catching most of the fallen. A roar of approval spurs on the renewed efforts of someone who bounces back up the shrine after testing the integrity of the road with his back. His progress is hindered as the platform is rocked by men shoving Hideyoshi and trying to wrench the torso free.

Paper mache and plaster-of-Paris soon succumb to the gathering of these bounty hunters, but the chicken mesh wire and wooden framework has been designed to withstand the forces of compression generated during the high speed trajectories around narrow Hakata corners. What was beautiful becomes lethal. The skeleton of exposed metal edges and snapped wood raises the ante on any unscheduled descents.

The flurry of a controlled dismount. When someone bolts past us, eyes wild with the pride of the kill, I know this Yamakasa adventure is demanding closure. He passes his shining trophy to a friend and runs back to the shrine, spurred on by requests for second pickings. Already small groups are dividing up the spoils. Squares of the fabric that adorned Hideyoshi as he surveyed his realm are held with a fatigued reverence. Another group stands proudly beside the set of gold Gion Miya and Kushida Shrine signs that were displayed in a place of honour high on the shrine. The shy pride in the smile of the man who wrestled this treasured artifact off the shrine intact can't conceal one surprising fact. He can't be any older than a high school student.
Day Eight: July 16, morning Packup

The morning after is a chance to wind down as we do the final cleanup. Because of the typhoon, our tent *tsumesho* was packed up before we ran the City Hall display circuit. The *kazariyama* displays were stripped down ahead of schedule. The *yamagoya* that houses our shrine was moved to a more sheltered location. We transferred our headquarters into the car park underneath the dental office of one of our team members. The *tsumesho* protocol for cleaning still applies.

Some men are crying. There is no shortage of intensity in certain interactions between seniors and juniors, all conducted under the rubric of "Experience is the best teacher", but a little fine-tuning of judgement can improve performance and attitudes. Everyone is back in civvies, although some people are wearing the team T shirt. A Kushida Shrine charm is visible under one plain white shirt.

After the final toast, we are treated to a little comic relief as the Third-in-charge does an imitation of a series of comments made by a Yamakasa personality from another team. There is no sense of resonance for anyone in our gang but there are titters of recognition as we get a second-hand delivery of comments about the failure of the current crop to live up to the expectations of their seniors.

After each *naorai* celebration, everyday the dishes and glasses must be washed up and stored away. After the concentrated team work of each run, high jinks with water and detergent are part of the Yamakasa rhythm. Crockery moves in an orderly progression through multiple rinses and inspections as verbal chaos reigns. Sitting cross-legged on the street, the loincloth offers little protection from the texture of the black bitumen.
There is plenty of give and take as wits warm up, subject to the occasional bucket of cold water down an unsuspecting back if anyone gets too stroppy.

On the final day, the demand for cold water exceeds supply. Lively laughter as the property of the district is washed, rinsed and stored away. The buckets are being stacked when one glass shatters, concealed and forgotten inside the bubbles. Fortunately no injuries but the man responsible for the sole breakage of the season would have preferred a different conclusion to his Yamakasa calendar. Profuse apologies.

The best parting greeting, unsolicited, from my main red headband man: "See you next year."

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http://www.kiriekobo.com

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