

## Article

# The Gion Festival in Kyoto and Glocalization

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**Abstract:** The Gion Festival is a world-famous festival that takes place in Kyoto in July. It dates back to the Heian period (794–1185) and originated as a *goryō-e* ritual to placate departed spirits and disease-divinities. It is linked to the Yasaka Shrine, and it represents a great variety of religious and cultural influences. It is a complex and multidimensional event where issues of globalization can be seen at play at the local level. Against this background, this paper analyzes the Gion Festival as a religious and cultural phenomenon in relation to glocalization and the production of locality. In particular, it explores how the City of Kyoto represented the festival in connection with the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the local–global interactions that relate to international tourism and global bureaucracy.

**Keywords:** Gion Festival; glocalization; festivals; *matsuri*; locality; UNESCO; tourism

## 1. Introduction

The Gion Festival (Gion Matsuri 祇園祭 in Japanese) takes place in what used to be the ancient capital of Japan and is now a global, hyper-touristic city promoting ‘traditional’ culture. Before proceeding with our discussion, let us set the scene of this world-famous festival: Kyoto in summer. July in Kyoto is hot and humid, and the Gion Festival almost marks the end of the rainy season. This signals the beginning of other summer festivities and festivals in August, such as *obon* お盆, Jizōbon 地藏盆, which is dedicated to the bodhisattva Jizō, and the Fire Festivals (*gozan no okuribi* 五山送り火, commonly known as *daimonji* 大文字). It is the season when the cicadas vehemently and loudly signal their presence. Kyotaites (as well as others) take the opportunity to wear their *yukata* and stroll on the busy streets, and people have not yet reached that level of summer fatigue that drains your energy away (*natsu bate* 夏バテ). In Kyoto, Gion Matsuri is undoubtedly the festival that attracts the largest crowds, and visitors come from all over Japan and abroad; it attracts far more people than other famous festivals, such as Aoi Matsuri 葵祭 and Jidai Matsuri 時代祭, which occur during May and October, respectively.

The Gion Festival dates back to the Heian period (794–1185), and it originated as a *goryō-e* 御霊会 ritual to placate the departed spirits (*goryō*) and disease-divinities (*ekijin* 疫神) that traditionally caused calamities and disease in the world.<sup>1</sup> The religious site of the ritual was the Gion-sha 祇園社, which, at the time, was a shrine under the administration of Tendai 天台 Buddhism; however, with the forced separation of Buddhism and Shinto (*shinbutsu bunri* 神仏分離) in the Meiji period (1868–1912), the Gion-sha was transformed into a Shinto shrine, and was renamed Yasaka Jinja 八坂神社. The festival was subsequently converted into a Shinto festival, which is what it is presented and known as today.

During festivals in Japan, deities are summoned and treated as honored guests; therefore, festivals include entertaining elements in order to appeal to and appease them. The Yasaka Shrine is dedicated to the following *kami* 神 (Shinto deities): Susanoo-no-mikoto 素戔鳴神社, his consort Kushi-inada-hime-no-mikoto 櫛稲田姫命, and their offspring, Yahashira-no-mikogami 八柱の御子神. The two processions of portable shrines (*mikoshi togyo* 神輿渡御) are dedicated to them. The Gion Festival offers a great variety of rituals and events during the whole month of July. It starts on 1 July with the opening ceremonies



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(*kippu-iri* 吉符入り) and purification rituals (*kiyo harai* 清祓), and it ends on 31 July with the summer purification ritual (*nagoshi no harae* 夏越の祓). Despite the complexity and variety of rituals, the most well-known events are the float processions (*Yamahoko junkō* 山鉾巡行) on 17 and 24 July, and the processions of portable shrines on the same days.<sup>2</sup> The float processions, with their beautifully decorated floats, are commonly considered the most aesthetic and entertaining parts of the festival (*furyū* 風流); however, the processions are also meant to purify and prepare the path for the portable shrines (*mikoshi*) when they travel from and to the Yasaka Shrine during the *shinkōsai* 神幸祭 and *kankōsai* 還幸祭 parades on 17 and 24 July, respectively (see also [Yasaka jinja \[1997\] 2007](#), p. 168). During these parades, the deities are borne on palanquins as they move to the temporary shrine (*o-tabisho* 御旅所) on Shijō street, which is in the middle of the shopping and commercial district. Here, they rest for a week before being carried back to the main shrine. In this sense, it is no coincidence that the members of the parading floats take part in a purification ritual, which is performed by a Shinto priest in front of the temporary shrine on Shijō street, on the way to the Yasaka Shrine (see [Porcu 2020](#)). Needless to say, during its long history, the Gion Festival has undergone a series of transformations. Among the most recent ones, we can recall the reintroduction of the second float parade (*ato matsuri*) in 2014, and the cancellation and modification of rituals in 2020 and 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Against this background, in this paper, I analyze the Gion Festival through the lens of glocalization and the production of locality, and I offer a new interpretative trajectory for the study of this complex and fascinating event. I would like to start by linking this present discussion to my previous research on both this festival ([Porcu 2012, 2020](#)) and on religion and popular culture (e.g., [Porcu 2013, 2014](#)). This analysis was prompted by a recent manga, *Gion Matsuri ni iku* 祇園祭にいく (Let's Visit the Gion Festival!), which was produced and published by Kyoto City in 2019, and is available online on its official website in both Japanese and English. It is aimed at tourists and (mostly young) residents alike (<https://www.city.kyoto.lg.jp/digitalbook/page/000000685.html> accessed on 3 May 2022).

The manga is set during the festival, and it narrates the story of a high-school girl living in Kyoto, Uzumasa Moe, her two friends, Matsuga Saki and Ono Misa, and their siblings.<sup>3</sup> The main character decides to write her summer break project on the festival after seeing the *mikoshi-arai* 神輿洗い ritual by chance on the Shijō bridge on 10 July, when the portable shrines (*mikoshi*) are purified with the water of the Kamogamo river. As a result, for the first time, she discovers that the festival is much more than the famous *Yamahoko junkō* (float procession), and she is determined to explore it more closely. The three characters also appear in the Kyoto City transportation campaign, *Kyōto o meguru! Kyōto de noru!* 京都を巡る! 京都で乗る! ("Get around Kyoto! Ride at Kyoto!" Kyoto Municipal Transportation Bureau <https://oneday-pass.kyoto>), and they serve as a link between the festival and other touristic experiences, such as sightseeing, visiting temples and shrines, and experiencing Kyoto through various events, foodstuffs, and shopping excursions, which are all advertised in the campaign. A serendipitous encounter happens during *hoko tate* 鉾建て, when the floats are assembled in the *yamahoko* neighborhoods before the procession. Here, Moe meets the granddaughter of a resident who is an expert in Gion Matsuri, and who strikingly resembles the former influential president of the Gion Matsuri Yamahoko Rengōkai (Association for the Gion Festival Yamahoko),<sup>4</sup> Yoshida Kōjirō, who introduces her to the festival's history and rituals.

I chose to introduce this exploration with this manga because, in addition to its story, an interesting factor that is relevant to our discussion on glocalization surfaces in its final pages (pp. 31–32). Indeed, the Gion Festival is presented as having something in common with the spirit of the United Nations' SDGs (the 17 Sustainable Development Goals). An image of the official SDG poster is visible in two manga frames, thus linking a local festival to global issues. Notably, this connection is made using the fact that the festival has its origins in the 9th century (869), it is a ritual aimed at dispelling calamities, and it is a long-standing tradition.<sup>5</sup> "Those prayers for peace" (*sō itta inori no kokoro* そういった祈りの

心, the heart/core of those prayers) are presented as resonating with the “beliefs of SDGs”; in other words, they are “universal goals” that aim to achieve “peace and prosperity” for all (p. 31). To this end, various projects are carried out during the Gion Festival, such as crowdfunding for security and safety measures, and recycling activities are also mentioned (p. 31). The explicit inclusion of the 17 SDGs reveals an attempt to link Gion Matsuri with pressing global issues, particularly those that are related to the environment through the “zero waste” (*gomi zero*) campaign, and an overall “universal” sentiment of peace, well-being, and security. The recycling campaign is introduced with the figures of Misa’s brother and his friends, who each volunteer for the “*gomi zero*” project during the busy eves of the float procession (*yoiyama* 宵山); this hints at ways that people can actively contribute to and participate in the festival which are not limited to merely visiting the floats, buying amulets, and enjoying street food (p. 12). Issues such as recycling and the campaign to keep the Gion area clean during the festival, “Gion Matsuri Clean Campaign” (*Gion Matsuri kurīn kyanpēn* 祇園クリーンキャンペーン), were included in the 2014 manual that was distributed by the Yamahoko Rengōkai to each preservation association (*hozonkai*). I had access to this manual when conducting my fieldwork,<sup>6</sup> and discussions concerning the “clean campaign” occupied a great deal of time during the *hozonkai* preparation meetings (cf. also Porcu 2020).

Aside from obvious concerns pertaining to the environment<sup>7</sup>, particularly those that are related to recycling and the reduction of litter, a question arises when reading this manga: how does a local festival in downtown Kyoto align with the “beliefs of [the] SDGs”? These goals are described by the United Nations as the “new universal agenda” that aims to “free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and to heal and secure our planet”, thus enabling us to take “transformative steps . . . to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path” where “no one will be left behind” (<https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda> accessed on 3 May 2022).

## 2. The Gion Festival and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

“Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” presents the program that was adopted at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in New York on 25 September 2015 and came into effect on 1 January 2016. Indeed, its goal is ambitious, as it includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets. Critical areas are identified in the plan: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership (Global solidarity). Here, people and the planet are placed at the center of a transformative process that should lead to the construction of “peaceful, just and inclusive societies”; that protects human rights and gender equality; and creates the conditions for sustainable economic growth, “shared prosperity and decent work for all”. Nevertheless, how do the 17 SDGs mentioned in the Gion Festival manga, which are at the heart of an agenda that is shared by 193 member states, relate to this (g)local festival?

The manga was published in 2019 by the Kyoto City Industry of Tourism, and it is the outcome of a collaboration between Kyoto City (Kyoto City Culture and Citizens Affairs Bureau/Kyoto City Transportation), the Yasaka Shrine, and the Yamahoko Rengōkai, among others. Through the use of the 17 SDGs, there is an attempt to attune the Gion Festival to a “universal”, global, transformative, long-term (15 years) plan, rather than keep the festival as a local, temporary (one month) summer phenomenon—although it is one with a history that spans more than 1000 years. Aside from the idea that the aim of peace and prosperity serves as a common ground between Gion Matsuri and the UN Agenda, it seems that the festival’s history and its transmission through generations prompts the manga producers to claim that “the Festival is similar to the beliefs of SDGs because of the many ways people have supported it for such a long time!” (p. 32). The manga’s final words, “SDGs and Gion Matsuri”, offer a clear example of global ideas that resonate at the local level. The last message conveyed to the readers is that the festival is indeed relevant, not only as an important historical and cultural asset linked to tradition, but it can even be

transformed into the recipient and carrier of universally recognized values and ideals that are shared by the member states of an organization born from the ruins of World War II. Given that this message comes from the only country in the world that experienced the tragedy of the atomic bomb, it seems even more significant.

Here, Victor Roudometof's definition of glocalization as a "refraction of globalization through the local" (Roudometof 2016, p. 65) aptly mirrors these dynamics. Rather than denying the relevance of globalization, instead accepting it as part of the process, Roudometof insists that the glocal should be granted analytical autonomy. He does not consider the local to be an antithesis to globalization, or as that which is "annihilated or absorbed or destroyed by globalization", but as something that "operates symbiotically with globalization and affects the end state or result". The result is a multitude of variations produced locally (a "multitude of glocalities") through the refraction of global ideas, cultural and religious items, and so on; in other words, that which is produced through a local-global interaction (Roudometof 2016, p. 65; emphasis in the original). The metaphor of refraction is useful for shedding light upon the ways that global ideas pass through the local and "radiate a spectrum of differences" (ibid.), and how global policies can be absorbed, reinterpreted, and implemented based on local specifications. In the manga, through the refraction of the United Nations SDGs "universal" plan onto Gion Matsuri (and the manga itself as a local product of the City of Kyoto), the festival, the City of Kyoto, and religious actors, such as the Yasaka Shrine, shift from their locality and aim at gaining legitimization as global players as well. Whether this was the intention of the producers of the manga is beyond the point here; what is relevant to our discussion is how glocality emerges in the specific case of a local (though world-famous) religious festival, as a condition through which "the end state of glocalization is glocally experienced" (Roudometof 2016, p. 66).

### 3. The Gion Festival as a Glocal Phenomenon

Global-local interactions have been discussed in the social sciences and the humanities since the early 1990s (e.g., see Robertson 1995, 2004; Appadurai 1996). From the outset, the discourse on glocalization has indicated that the production of locality is crucial when defining and explaining glocalization. In his seminal chapter, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity", Roland Robertson speaks of the local as being largely constructed on a "trans- or super-local basis", and stresses that globalization involves the reconstruction/production of "locality" (Robertson 1995, pp. 26, 30). In his most cited work, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Arjun Appadurai emphasizes that localities are historical products that are informed by global dynamics, and globalization is "a localizing process" (Appadurai 1996, pp. 18, 17; emphasis in the original). The relation between the local and the global is not a trajectory that is one-way only, and "locality-producing activities are not only context-driven but are also context-generative" (Appadurai 1996, p. 186); thus, these activities contribute to the production and reproduction of experiences, ideas, feelings, and so on, that can resonate in a variety of spheres (such as political, cultural, economic, and religious spheres) at the global level. Following this line of inquiry, the Gion Festival, with its events and rituals, can be considered a "spatiotemporal production of locality", given that its yearly repetition within neighborhoods<sup>8</sup> and other sites in downtown Kyoto, through "hard and regular work . . . produce[s] and maintain[s] its materiality" and its "structure of feeling" (Appadurai 1996, pp. 180–81), or "structures of experience" (Williams 1977, p. 132).<sup>9</sup>

Although it only partially coincides with Appadurai's (and Williams') use of the term, 'feeling' is among the themes that emerge from recent works on festivals. In this context, it means "the affective and often embodied engagement with the experience of the *matsuri*" that arises from diverse activities, ranging from artistic performances to rituals and communal gatherings, thus implying a "full-bodied immersion" in festivals that is articulated through diversified expressions of sensations and experiences (Foster and Porcu 2021, p. 3). In the case of the Gion Festival, this full-bodied immersion is part of an engagement that has lasted for more than 1000 years, and is a structure of social experience that is built

upon previous layers of experience. This creates a “temporary space–time of heightened emotions, awareness and engagement that transcend the quotidian”, while being embedded in a social fabric that is characterized by the constant negotiation of religious and secular boundaries (Foster and Porcu 2021, pp. 3–4). Closely related to the concept of an “embodied engagement” with *matsuri*, is the idea of identity that commonly emerges from the analysis of festivals (e.g., Ashkenazi 1993; Roemer 2010; Porcu 2012, 2020; Porcu and Foster 2021), of which the Gion Festival offers an excellent example.

Among the participants in the festival—particularly those who took part in my fieldwork, including interviewee members of the preservation associations and residents of the *yamahoko* area—the Gion Festival is perceived as strengthening their sense of community and as something which serves to reinforce their awareness of belonging to an important event (Porcu 2020, p. 68; see also Roemer 2010; Brumann 2012, chp. 5). This can be seen at three different but interconnected levels: local, national, and global. Locally, it is a neighborhood festival, and indeed, the atmosphere within the neighborhoods is ‘local’ if we consider the structure of the neighborhoods (*chōnai*) and how life is lived in downtown Kyoto. *Chōnai* (neighborhoods) comprise blocks that are delimited by two parallel streets, and they are governed by neighborhood associations (*chōnaikai*) that also organize local events and rituals.<sup>10</sup> The composition of *chōnai* is varied, and they can consist of both residential and non-residential buildings, such as offices, shops, and restaurants. I have lived in two of these neighborhoods in the center of Kyoto for several years, and as one of my informants puts it, the atmosphere and lifestyle are such that the neighborhood feels as though it is a “village within the city” (see Porcu 2012, 2020).

At the national level, the Gion Festival is one of the three major festivals in Japan, and it attracts massive crowds of visitors from all over the country. Moreover, it was classified as an Intangible Folk Cultural Property by the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs (*mukei minzoku bunkazai* 無形民俗文化財, 1959). The floats were added to the list of Important Tangible Folk Cultural Properties (*jūyō yūkei minzoku bunkazai* 重要有形民俗文化財, 1962), and in 1979, the float ceremony (*yamahoko gyōji*) was also designated as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property (*jūyō mukei minzoku bunkazai* 重要無形民俗文化財).

At the global level, the festival is a world-famous touristic and cultural event, and in 2009, it gained further recognition at the international level when the float ceremony was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (ICH, *mukei bunka isan* 無形文化遺産). The setting in which this decision was taken is important for our discussion: the fourth session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage that was held in the United Arab Emirates.<sup>11</sup> Japan nominated the *Yamahoko junkō* for inscription through the Agency for Cultural Affairs. Among the reasons given, in line with Art. 2 of the 2003 “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” (UNESCO 2003), was the idea that the floats are “moving museums”; that there is a long-standing tradition which is transmitted by the residents of the neighborhoods involved;<sup>12</sup> and that the float ceremony includes the presence of musicians and artisans. The description of the *Yamahoko* procession ends with the statement that it is “a representative urban summer festival showcasing the creative spirit and artistry of the float-building districts and [it] provid[es] entertainment for the entire city” (UNESCO 2009a, p. 69). The committee decided that based on “the information provided in the Nomination File 00269”, the float ceremony of the Gion Festival met the criteria for inscription, and it provides a brief justification with five main points: (1) it has a long-standing tradition, having been passed down through generations, and it is collectively organized by local residents who recognize it as “a symbol of their identity and continuity”; (2) the fact that the inscription would raise its visibility (and that of other festivals) and increase awareness of the “importance of intangible cultural heritage at national and international levels”; (3–4) the safeguarding measures that have been implemented, and will be assured by the *Yamahoko Rengōkai*, the umbrella association of the preservation associations, whose consent was included in the nomination; and (5) the

previous status of the float procession as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property that was acknowledged at the national level (UNESCO 2009a, p. 69). The former Director General of UNESCO, Matsuura Kōichirō (1999–2009), was among the staunchest advocates of the ICH, and he made its safeguarding a priority of his mandate. His conviction was also based on the idea that his country, Japan, “gives equal attention to both tangible and intangible heritage”, and that both types of heritage form the “foundation of the world’s cultural diversity so essential to humanity’s sustainable future” (UNESCO 2009b, p. 2).

What emerges from the interactions between local, national, and global layers, as illustrated above, is the production of distinctive forms of locality. Matsuura’s words, for example, imply the central role of his country and his own worldview as being a product of a geographic and conceptual locality that has influenced the trajectory of UNESCO’s cultural policy globally (cf. Foster 2017). In this regard, Japan has played a crucial role; the country has directed the trajectory of the heritage field at the international level through financial contributions, leading administrators, and the revision of concepts and categories such as “authenticity” in conservation policies (see the Nara Document in 1994). Japan is therefore “competing for global authority in the cultural sector” (Hafstein 2018, pp. 56–71). Such dynamics reconnect the symbiotic operation between the local and globalization, as highlighted by Roudometof. It also recalls Salazar’s observations on the “subjectivity” of UNESCO’s idea of world heritage, given that such ideas are the product of “local-to-global political processes” which are impacted by national politics (Souard and Salazar 2022, p. 124). From another perspective, due to its inscription on the ICH Representative List, the Gion Festival becomes a citizen in “a sort of ‘imagined community’ . . . or ‘imagined world’ . . . of distinct traditions, practices, beliefs, etc., united only by their status of being together on a list or website”, which is similar to what Michael Foster observes when analysing Toshidon, a festival on the small island of Shimo-Koshikijima (Foster 2017, p. 79).<sup>13</sup> Incidentally, the national level, which is related to a “prestigious Japanese heritage-scape” (ibid.), and the “infrastructure of global bureaucracy” (Foster 2021, p. 159), are thus brought together. Designating the floats and the *Yamahoko* procession as both tangible and intangible *cultural* properties not only gives them “official” recognition in terms of their cultural value at the national and international level, but it also provides legitimization for financial support through public funding that they would otherwise be excluded from as a result of the postwar Constitution of Japan (Brumann 2012, p. 173; Porcu 2020).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, it is evident that the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity status, which was decided at a meeting in the United Arab Emirates, expands and diffuses the boundaries of a local (neighborhoods’) event, enabling it to become a national symbol of pride. Christoph Brumann highlights this in his incisive analysis of Kyoto’s townhouses (*kyō machiya*) and the Gion Festival—two of the most celebrated elements of “traditional” culture in Kyoto and Japan as a whole—which notes that acquiring heritage status means that something becomes part of “everyone’s heritage rather than that of a privileged few” (Brumann 2009, p. 291; see also Brumann 2012, chp. 7).

Through these processes, the small units (which include the 33 *yamahoko* neighborhoods, their preservation associations, the *Yamahoko Rengōkai*, the organization bodies of the *mikoshi* parade, and so on, which are all related to the Yasaka Shrine) operate almost autonomously from one another during the organization and performance of the Gion Festival. Moreover, each unit, which has its own dynamics and experiences<sup>15</sup>, emerges as part of a “multitude of glocalities”. They are the result of the reciprocal interactions between global and local ideas, items (e.g., the floats as nationally recognized tangible cultural properties), and feelings (e.g., the construction of local identity and the sense of being part of a festival that is also legitimized and recognized at the global level), and global policies are subsequently impacted by local experiences as well. In other words, these processes show how the glocal (the production of locality) emerges through the refraction of a global structure that encompasses politics, cultural recognition, bureaucracy, and tourism.

#### 4. The Gion Festival, Tourism, and Glocalization

The manga *Let's Visit Gion Festival!*, which was produced by the City of Kyoto, and is particularly concerned with tourism (and local transportation), leads us to a discussion on the festival in relation to glocalization and tourism. This will be elucidated in the following section.

Roland Robertson appropriately criticized interpretations of globalization as a process that is merely related to “very large-scale phenomena” or as a process that “overrides locality”. Instead, he urged analysis of “the dynamics of the production and reproduction of difference and, in the broadest sense, locality” in more subtle ways (Robertson 1995, pp. 25–29). His main argument is that the local should not be considered as being inevitably opposed to the global, but rather, it should be seen as “an aspect of globalization”, as that which is included in the global; however, he also warns against falling into the trap of equating globalization with homogenization (Robertson 1995, pp. 30–35). Robertson identifies tourism as a clear example of glocalization. In his words:

To a considerable extent micromarketing—or, in the more comprehensive phrase, glocalization—involves *the construction* of increasingly differentiated consumers, the ‘invention’ of ‘consumer traditions’ (of which tourism, arguably the biggest ‘industry’ of the contemporary world, is undoubtedly the most clear-cut example). To put it very simply, diversity sells. (Robertson 1995, p. 29; emphasis in the original)

Drawing on his work, Joelle Soulard and Noel B. Salazar emphasize that globalization has also provided an opportunity to travel and experience different cultures more easily, despite all the conflicts and tensions that it has created. Rather than remaining in the abstract, in their chapter on “Glocalization and Tourism Experiences”, they emphasize how globalization is located in particular places that are, at the same time, also “produced in discourses of globalization”; therefore, given this two-way trajectory, glocalization is considered to be a concept that incorporates such interrelated processes, “whereby new boundaries are created between local and global orders, and both gain strength”, and it is identified as “a central mechanism in tourism” (Soulard and Salazar 2022, p. 123). Robertson identifies international tourism as playing a crucial role in the production of the local, with the “sacred” being of specific interest for this form of tourism (Robertson 1992, p. 173).

Tourism has definitely impacted the Gion Festival and it has been crucial for decision making processes. Among the clearest examples, are the various changes related to the route of the *Yamahoko* procession, which also sparked the famous “*shinkō ka kankō ka*” (“*faith or tourism?*”) controversy in 1955 (and again in 2014); and, in 2014, the reinstatement of the two processions, *saki* and *ato matsuri*, that were merged in 1966 (see Porcu 2020). Moreover, the festival is an important economic factor for local businesses and is one reason to initiate new activities, such as shared economic endeavors. An example of such an endeavor is Airbnb, which blurs the line between the local and global hospitality sectors as it enables residents to host tourists through its online platform, which is based in San Francisco, but operates worldwide, and makes profit through local resources (cf. Soulard and Salazar 2022, p. 126).

The presentation of the Gion Festival through manga and other advertisements that are translated into English can be considered a type of glocalization of tourism strategy, wherein elements of a local culture that are of interest to visitors (a religious/cultural festival with a long history) are shared with tourists through “authentic” formats to create a “memorable travel experience” (Soulard and Salazar 2022, p. 128). Here, we have two experiences; one occurs through the manga/pamphlets, and the other through the lived experience of physically viewing and participating in the Gion Festival. With regard to the former, the “authentic” format is that of the manga, which is one of Japan’s soft power tools that it uses to successfully export its culture. Manga in Japan have been used in practically all spheres of life, ranging from politics, to education, to religion. Manga, anime

(animation movies), video games, and their respective characters have enabled Japanese culture to be known globally. Indeed, manga have been translated in numerous languages, and anime have garnered a great deal of cultural recognition at the international level (see Porcu 2013); however, manga and anime are hybrid forms themselves, and although they are presented and accepted worldwide as “unique” (local) expressions of Japanese culture, they are the result of the intermingling of different cultures and influences (Chinese ink painting, North American comics, Disney products, etc.) (Porcu 2014, p. 161), and can be seen as expressions of glocality.

It is also apparent that such globalization of tourism can lead to the production of alternative forms of the same locality. The 2018 English leaflet for the *Yamahoko* float procession<sup>16</sup> explicitly presents its religious elements and how the procession relates to the Yasaka Shrine. Religious aspects are downplayed in the Japanese original, which is in line with the presentation of this festival; in other words, Shinto rituals and other festivals are presented as “cultural” and “traditional” events, rather than “religious” events (thus also avoiding the connection with the contested term *shūkyō* 宗教, religion. See Porcu 2012, 2020). In addition to two tourism-related adverts and a warning that Kyoto streets are non-smoking areas, the leaflet in English explains the floats and their sacredness, the Shinto deities (*kami*), the amulets “dedicated to a special god for each float”, the sacred ceremonial rope cutting ritual that starts the procession (*shimenawa kiri* しめ縄切り), and the role of the float procession in purifying the path for the *mikoshi* parade to and from the Yasaka Shrine. Some of these elements are not present in the original Japanese pamphlet. Here, *gofu* 護符 (amulets) and *chimaki* 粽<sup>17</sup> are listed in a section called *Gion matsuri no tanoshimi kata* 祇園祭の楽しみ方, together with the characteristics of the *yama* and *hoko* floats, the typical festival music (*Gion bayashi* 祇園囃子), and the exhibition of folding screens (*byōbu matsuri* 屏風祭, which is not mentioned in the English version). The section’s heading, “*tanoshimi kata*”, refers to an entertaining and enjoyable mood, whereas the choice of words in the English translation is rather neutral and descriptive: “Features of the Gion Matsuri”.<sup>18</sup> The Japanese pamphlet includes also a section on the two *mikoshi* parades, but does not mention their connection to the *Yamahoko junkō*. As a result, the English version of the pamphlet produces a religion-specific representation of the procession that is aimed at international visitors, and is lacking in the original Japanese.

This adaptation can be read in two ways: the first concerns the typical avoidance of any reference to “religious” elements in festivals, rituals, and so on, instead presenting them as customs and traditions, as mentioned above. The second way pertains to the inclusion of certain aspects for a Western (English-speaking) audience, which, allegedly, tend to be more interested in “religion” than local Japanese visitors.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the exclusion of the *byōbu matsuri* from the English pamphlet is quite interesting, considering that the folding screens exhibition takes place within private traditional houses (mostly *machiya*). By keeping this information within the more restricted community of Japanese visitors (or people who can read Japanese), it seems as though there is an intention to somehow make this event more intimate and protect the local residents—who host *byōbu matsuri*—of the ancient capital (*inishie no to* いにしへの都) against the wave of international tourists. Nevertheless, it is a well-known event, and everyone who passes by the open-door *machiya* can admire their folding screens, hanging scrolls (*kakejiku* 掛け軸), and Gion Matsuri related objects. In this case, the omission from the English pamphlet might be interpreted as a means of defense, in that it is an attempt to limit the extent of the intrusion of global elements into their local environment, as opposed to an open acceptance of new elements and experiences (Roudometof 2005, pp. 121, 127). The exclusion of an important artistic and cultural event from this specific leaflet might be viewed as something which contradicts the tendency to promote Kyoto as Japan’s cultural capital.<sup>20</sup>

The Gion Festival is indeed a “tapestry” of different cultures, which is also materially and symbolically composed of rich tapestries from various parts of the world (e.g., Europe, Iran) that decorate the floats. Different cultures are expressed in the stories and legends that are related to the floats and their deities, such as those of Chinese origin (e.g., Koi

Yama 鯉山, Niwatori Hoko 鷄鉾, Hakuga Yama 伯牙山, and Hakurakuten Yama 白樂天山), or those that are influenced by Buddhism. Buddhism is an important religious aspect of the festival, and it was transmitted to Japan via Korea, with its accompanying baggage containing cultural and technical capital, such as the Chinese ideograms which comprise the foundation of the Japanese writing system. All this (and much more), through cross-cultural exchanges and hybridizations, forms the “authentic” and prestigious aspects of the *Yamahoko junkō* and its floats. With regard to the promotion of “authentic” local identity and experiences, both of which are within the remit of the Gion Festival, and other traditional Kyoto-related cultural experiences offered to tourists, we may think of tours that offer glimpses into the Noh theatre, Bunraku, the tea ceremony, and ikebana; although these are symbols of Japan’s long history and “authenticity”, they are also hybrid cultural systems themselves (again, one might think of the immense influence of Chinese culture). In the case of the festival, a clear-cut example of such an “authentic” experience, which is offered to tourists, exchange students, researchers (Roemer 2010, p. 508), and expats, is the recruitment of male foreigners to participate as pullers and carriers of the floats during the float procession. This, together with other activities “on the stage”, is a gender-limited experience. In fact, women are excluded from accessing various sites during the festival, and they are unable to participate in rituals and events, given the “male” character of this festival where a woman’s role is marginalized, and is often performed backstage (see Wakita 1999; Brumann 2012, pp. 194–202; Porcu 2020).

Although the float procession is the most attractive tourist event, the festival is complex and multidimensional, and numerous other religious rituals and cultural performances take place throughout July. Various experiences which involve traditional cultural aspects are available to viewers and participants, although some of them are restricted to limited groups of (local) “insiders”. One such example is the ritual tea ceremony, *kencha shiki* 献茶式, that takes place on 16 July at the Yasaka Shrine, and the subsequent tea ceremony gatherings which occur in the vicinity of the shrine. When I participated in this ritual, I already had long-term experience as a tea ceremony practitioner; thus, I was able to participate because I belonged to this network, and not because I was an “external” researcher. Although, for limit of space, I am unable to delve into this matter further, from what I observed, the *kencha shiki* is not aimed at tourists, but rather, it is addressed to the ‘usual’ network of tea ceremony practitioners and their friends, which is similar to other tea ceremony gatherings in Kyoto.<sup>21</sup> In Kyoto, the “authentic” experience of the tea ceremony is usually performed and offered to tourists in other venues; for instance, in famous temples, or in private houses and facilities (participation in tea ceremonies may also be possible through individual endeavors, social media, websites, and so on, if it is not possible via official institutions). For example, “Tea Ceremony Koto”<sup>22</sup> offers tea ceremony, kimono, and ikebana experiences in English, depending on the plan chosen by the tourists. In addition to the host’s qualifications as a tea ceremony instructor in the Urasenke school, and the assurance that they will offer “the authentic tea ceremony”, the TripAdvisor “certificate of excellence” legitimizes their belonging to a global community. This form of diversified entrepreneurship can be included among glocalised tourism services “based on the tourists’ desire to feel included and experience a destination more authentically” (cf. Soulard and Salazar 2022, p. 127). Here, religious micromarketing is used to be more inclusive. For instance, Muslims are specifically addressed: “We are Halal friendly: We have the space for praying, and serve Halal sweets & tea!!” (however, tea and Japanese sweets do not need to be halal to be consumed by Muslims). Needless to say, this “authentic” experience could not leave Zen and samurai enthusiasts behind; for instance, the “private tea ceremony” plan is offered in conjunction with a “Zen experience”, and it is presented as a means of “travel[ing] to [the] Samurai period!” These catchphrases are designed to appeal to a “western” audience, and they are not included in the plans offered to Japanese customers.

## 5. Conclusions

The Gion Festival is characterized by complexity and multidimensionality, and in this article, I have explored it in relation to glocalization and the production of locality. Building upon the observations of the well-known Japanese scholar, Yoneyama Toshinao, who considered Gion Festival to be the sum of numerous *sai* 祭 (festivals, rituals) rather than a “single festival”, and the resultant combined efforts of various organizing bodies, preservation associations and their umbrella organization, priests, and residents (Yoneyama 1986), the festival can also be viewed as an expression of a “multitude of glocalities”, to use Roudometof’s articulation, which is produced through the interactions between global and local ideas, items, and feelings.

In this respect, the manga *Let’s Visit the Gion Festival!*, published by the City of Kyoto in 2019, provides the opportunity to link this local event to the “universal”, ambitious global program of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals that aim to “eradicate poverty” and build a world where “peace and prosperity” prevail. With regard to the United Nations, this time in relation to their Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), we have analyzed the Gion Matsuri Yamahoko procession as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and we have explored the dynamics that occur at the local, national, and global levels, which thus result in the production of glocality. Notably, this analysis has revealed the two-way process through which the locality of Gion Festival is, among other things, the result of a refraction of UNESCO’s global political and bureaucratic structure. Moreover, local and national strategies have also impacted its trajectory, such as the idea of world heritage itself being the product of “local-to-global political processes” (Soulard and Salazar 2022), and locality and globality being subject to relativity and interconnectedness (Robertson 1995).

Aside from the connection with UNESCO’s heritage status, we have shed light on some presentations of the Gion Festival—such as those translated into English—and how they might be considered as a kind of glocalization of tourism strategy, wherein elements of local culture are shared with visitors through “authentic” formats to create a memorable experience (Soulard and Salazar 2022). Moreover, it became clear that a strategy of diversification, which is inherent to the production of locality, was implemented when certain elements that are related to the religious aspects of the festival were emphasized in the English leaflet, and were presented differently to Japanese audiences. This is because these elements are probably considered to be more interesting for “western” visitors, whereas other “cultural” events, such as the *byōbu matsuri*, were left out of the English pamphlet.

Although this article has only analyzed some instances where local–global interactions are apparent in the Gion Festival, I hope this exploration into glocalization reveals that it is a fruitful analytical tool for a more nuanced study of this famous religious and cultural event, and local festivals more broadly.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Constraints do not allow for a detailed history of the festival. For this, see (McMullin 1988; Yoneyama 1974; Wakita 1999, pp. 2–14; Brumann 2012, pp. 165–74; Yagi 2015); for details on the Meiji Period, see also (Breen 2020, pp. 49–56). For a detailed analysis of Gion Matsuri rituals and events, see (Porcu 2020).
- <sup>2</sup> In 2014, the procession reverted to the pre-1966 two-procession pattern: *saki matsuri* 前祭 on 17 July, and *ato matsuri* 後祭 on 24 July. In 1966, the two processions were merged and performed only on 17 July (for more details see Porcu 2020).
- <sup>3</sup> The characters’ names refer to two areas in Kyoto, Uzumasa and Matsugasaki. Posters with these characters can be found all over Kyoto (personal email communication with a resident, 20 July 2022).
- <sup>4</sup> This is the umbrella association of the 34 float preservation associations (*honzonkai* 保存会).

- 5 The date of origin provided in the manga (869), though commonly referred to as the start of the festival, is considered by historians to be a legend (see, for example, [Brumann 2012](#), p. 165).
- 6 I conducted one year of intense fieldwork by living in one of the Gion Festival neighborhoods during 2013–2014, and follow-up fieldwork in July 2018. I have participated in all the relevant events of the festival, including the *kujitori shiki* (drawing of lot ceremony at Kyoto City Hall) and the ritual tea ceremony (*kenchasai*) at the Yasaka Shrine, in addition to taking part in *honzonkai* meetings and preparations in two neighborhoods, and I have interviewed leaders and members of the *honzonkai*, the Yamahoko Rengōkai, and residents (see also [Porcu 2020](#)).
- 7 For an analysis of glocalization and the environment in Japanese religions, see ([Dessi 2017](#)). For a recent volume on glocalization and culture, see ([Roudometof and Dessi 2022](#)).
- 8 Here, neighborhoods refer to the actual neighborhoods in Kyoto (*chōnai*) that belong to the areas that are involved in the Gion Festival, rather than Appadurai’s theoretical sense of the word. Appadurai uses the term to indicate “actually existing social forms in which locality, as dimension or value, is variably realized. . . . [they] are situated communities characterized by their actuality, whether spatial or virtual, and their potential for social reproduction” ([Appadurai 1996](#), pp. 179, 204 fn). Some of the characteristics of this use of “neighborhood” coincide, but they are used differently.
- 9 Although Appadurai, who borrows the term from Raymond Williams, refers to the “structure of feelings” in his book, mostly in relation to ethnic implosions and violence (pp. 149–54), the idea of local feelings/experiences being “the product of long-term interactions of local and global cascades of events that build up structure of feelings, which are both social and historical” is also useful in cases where violence is not the primary concern. The term “structure of feeling”, in the context of festivals, has been used by Michael Foster in his analysis of the Namahage festival when he defines “belief” (*shinkō*) as “a part of a much more complex ‘structure of feeling’”. Here, he highlights the appropriateness of the term to convey the “vagueness and lack of materiality of the religious ‘feelings’” tied to this festival, without, however, excluding “the coherent way in which Namahage is a real part of life experience” ([Foster 2021](#), pp. 135–37).
- 10 Kyoto has a structure that is made up of parallel grids—in north–south and east–west directions—and the city is divided into almost uniform blocks.
- 11 The session took place in Abu Dhabi from 28 September to 2 October 2009, and the committee members hailed from 24 countries (<https://ich.unesco.org/en/4com> accessed on 3 May 2022).
- 12 Neighborhoods are defined in the document as being “the city’s self-governing districts”, although this term is linked to the Japanese *chōnaikai*, rather than *honzonkai*, the latter being the ‘official’ organizational bodies of the float procession. For the difference between *chōnaikai* and *honzonkai*, their role in the Gion Festival, and issues related to the separation of religion and the state in this regard, see ([Porcu 2012, 2020](#)) for other festivals see also ([Porcu and Foster 2021](#)).
- 13 Here, Foster is drawing on Anderson’s imagined communities (1991), Appadurai’s imagined world and -scapes (1996), and Di Giovine’s term heritage-scape (all quoted in his paper). The ICH recognition process is not without problems, and Foster points to the perception of participants in small local festivals, such as Toshidon; indeed, although they feel part of this national and global complex, and though they are proud of such recognition, they simultaneously feel disconnected from it, particularly with regard to, for example, decision making, where their voices are not sufficiently heard, and in terms of their affinity toward other groups, with whom they have no contacts ([Foster 2017](#), pp. 79–84). On Namahage, which is another local festival that takes place in the small city of Oga (Akita Prefecture), and a sense of being an integral part of the UNESCO global context, see also ([Foster 2021](#)).
- 14 The postwar Constitution, issued in 1947, explicitly sanctions the separation of religion and the state (Art. 20) and prohibits funding of religious activities (Art. 89). Of course, there are ways to circumvent the limits posed by the separation of religion and the state, which also applies to funding for religious events and festivals organized at the local level (see [Porcu 2012, 2020](#)).
- 15 Although the *honzonkai* fall under the jurisdiction of the Yamahoko Rengōkai, and though general decisions are taken at that level, they nevertheless operate independently from one another (see [Porcu 2020; Brumann 2012](#), chp. 5).
- 16 Although the festival has numerous rituals and events throughout July, this is considered to be its “climax”, or most well-known event, both at the national and international level, attracting masses of tourists.
- 17 *Chimaki* are typical charms made from bamboo leaves; they are designed to ward against calamities and epidemics, and they are sold by each float.
- 18 On the importance of processes of cultural translation—this does not only refer to the textual and linguistic level—with regard to the need to translate between “locally specific knowledge cultures”, to address “fractures and disparities in the translation dynamic”, and the “translational turn” in the humanities, see ([Bachmann-Medick 2009](#)).
- 19 We cannot delve into the issues of the history and perception of “religion” (*shūkyō*) in Japan and the “non-religious” status of Shinto here. For some sources, see ([Isomae 2012; Krämer 2013](#)).
- 20 *Byōbu matsuri* was included in some of the previous English leaflets (for example, see the 2006 version).
- 21 The same can be said for the short tea ceremony offered by the Tsuki Hoko float on the eve of the procession, and in which I participated in 2018.

- <sup>22</sup> Here, the term for ancient capital (*koto* 京都) is used for branding purposes, together with the symbol of a Buddhist temple pagoda. The house is located near the famous Kinkakuji temple, which is highlighted due to its world heritage status. See <https://teaceremony-kyoto.com/about-us> and <https://www.facebook.com/tea.koto/> (accessed on 6 June 2022).

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