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# History of the Umbrella in Japan and Meaning of Umbrellas in Festivals

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Japan's tsuyu<sup>1</sup> rainy season makes the *kasa*, or umbrella, essential. Danjyo Tatsuo, Specially Appointed Professor of Humanities at Beppu University, is expert on Japanese folklore and folk tools and author of numerous research papers on umbrellas. He explains the history of the umbrella in Japan and its meaning in festivals.

## When did the *kasa* first appear in Japanese history?

First, looking at the role that the *kasa*, or umbrella, it is to cover the head to protect against the rain and to shade from the sun. In Japanese, there are two distinct kanji for *kasa* referring to two different types of umbrella: the hat type worn directly on the head and the type of a hand-held umbrella with a handle. The *kasa* first appears in Japanese history around the 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the time, umbrella referred to the *sashikake kasa* that was held over religious and

political figures in positions of authority. Before that, umbrellas were reserved for symbolic god-like beings such as people of extremely high rank or the canopies above the heads of Buddha statues or hung from temple ceilings. It was not until the 12<sup>th</sup> century that the common people began to carry umbrellas for practical use.

The *sashikake kasa* is a large umbrella with a long handle held by an attendant over a person of high rank. This situation is portrayed in the *Nenju Gyoji Emaki* ("Picture Scroll of Annual Events"). Commissioned by Emperor Go-Shirakawa<sup>2</sup> to depict courtly ceremonies, folk festivals, and other traditional events, this scroll was completed in 1165. As such, it is a good source of information on the customs and man-

ners of the time.

The scroll depicts scenes from the Kamo-sai<sup>3</sup> festival in Kyoto, with a large *kasa* shown held over the *kampaku* (regent to an adult emperor), as well as an



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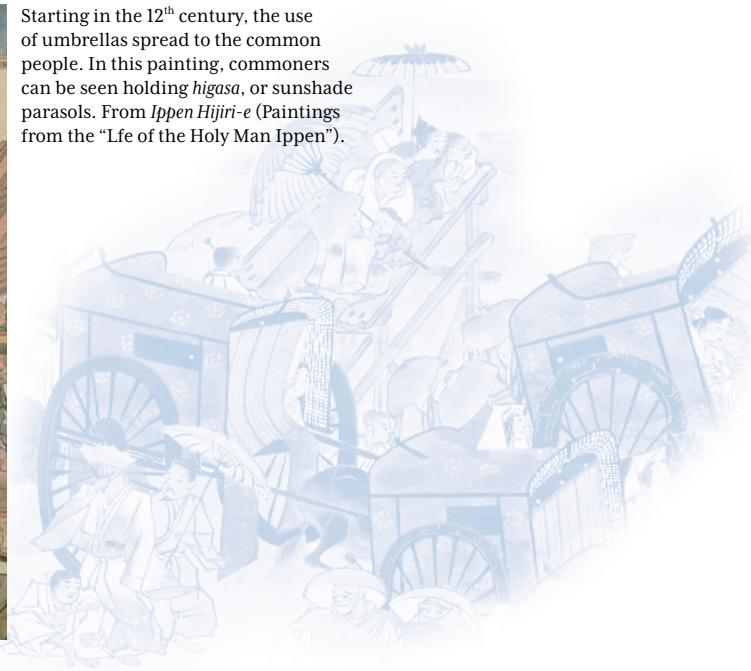
Photos: National Diet Library

Left: A canopy of flowers is depicted above the head of a bodhisattva statue. From the Nara National Museum collection.

Right: A large umbrella carried at the Kamo-sai festival. From the *Nenju Gyoji Emaki* ("Picture Scroll of Annual Events").



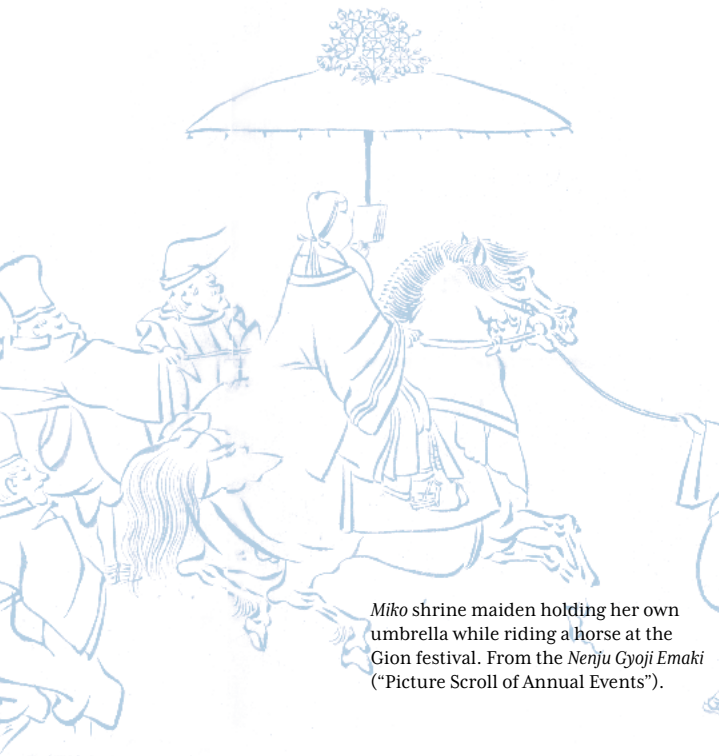
Starting in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the use of umbrellas spread to the common people. In this painting, commoners can be seen holding *higasa*, or sunshade parasols. From *Ippen Hijiri-e* (Paintings from the "Life of the Holy Man Ippen").



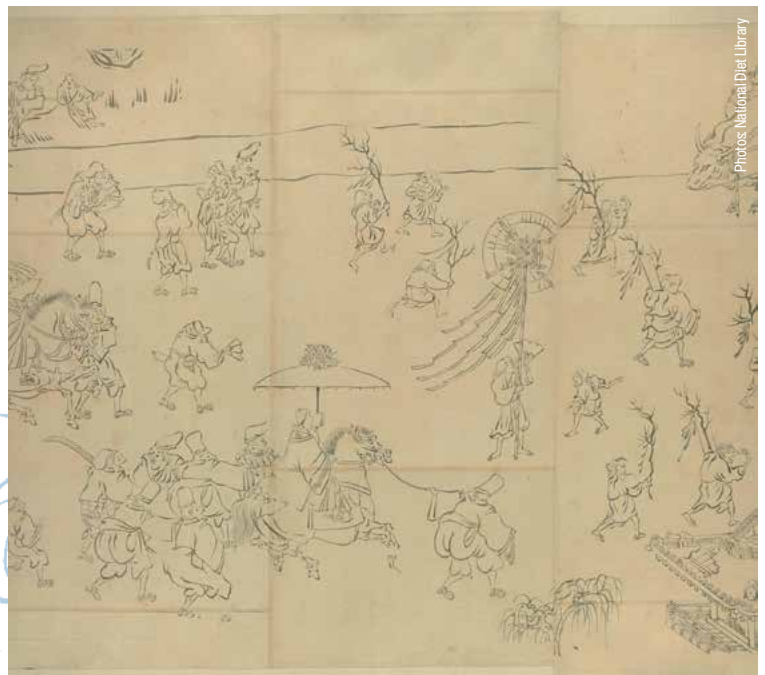
umbrella topped with decorations consisting of miniature reproductions of shrines and a horse race. Both are elaborate umbrellas designed to convey authority. A *miko*<sup>4</sup>, or shrine maiden, shown riding a horse at the Gion-Goryoe<sup>5</sup> festival at Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto, is depicted with an umbrella similarly decorated with flowers. However, she is holding it herself, which indicates that the *miko* were seen as having less authority than the previously mentioned *kampaku*, who had a large umbrella held over him by someone else. We can

understand a person's position in the society at the time just from the way the umbrella was held.

Incidentally, this is not just true in Japan. There are also depictions of umbrellas held over the heads of kings in ancient Egypt, some 3,200 years ago. A portrait of one of the Louis kings of France also depicts an umbrella being held over the king's head. The use of the umbrella as a symbol of political and religious authority is common in both the East and West.



*Miko* shrine maiden holding her own umbrella while riding a horse at the Gion festival. From the *Nenju Cyoji Emaki* ("Picture Scroll of Annual Events").





Large *kasaboko* floats form a procession at the Gion festival in Kyoto.

### When was the shift from the *wagasa*, made using traditional Japanese *washi* paper, to today's Western umbrella?

Western-style *yogasa* umbrellas did not arrive in Japan until 1853 or later, after Japan ended its policy of isolation and their import began. The name for them at the time was “umbrella,” in English, or *komori-gasa*, literally “bat umbrella,” because the black cloth and umbrella ribs were said to remind people of the wings of a bat. After the arrival of Western umbrellas, people began to use properly between Japanese-style *wagasa* made from bamboo and *washi*, and Western-style *yogasa* made from cloth.

When I was a child in the 1960s, I remember our mothers still carried *wagasa*, so both types were presumably in use for quite a long time after the introduction of the Western umbrella. I think it is likely that *wagasa* were used when kimono were still everyday wear, and then as women wore kimono less often, there was a rapid shift from Japanese-style to Western umbrellas. It seems that the decline in *wagasa* use was inversely proportional to the rise in Western-style clothing as everyday wear.

### Decorated umbrellas can be seen at Japanese festivals. What meaning does the festival umbrellas hold?

Umbrellas are used throughout the world, but one of the characteristics that is unique to the *kasa* is the belief that souls and gods descend onto it. This idea is expressed in the word *yorishiro* (an object that attracts gods or spirits). Animism, the belief that all things possess a living soul, is deeply rooted in Japanese history. The umbrella is said to be conducive as a *yorishiro* for souls to inhabit due to their circular shape, which resembles the shape of a soul, and the handle, which resembles a pillar (which was thought to be an accessible place for a soul to descend).

Japanese festivals are held at temples and shrines to express gratitude to the gods, celebrate a good harvest, and make offerings to the spirits of the ancestors, so it is likely *kasa* appeared at the festivals as *yorishiro* to attract the spirits. The umbrella is thought to have played a variety of roles in festivals, beginning with the role of appeasing the spirit of the deceased and of absorbing and exorcising disease. Eventually, these *kasa* became large and showy and were used as

umbrellas representing specific towns. Festival processions are led by large floats featuring *kasa* covered in hanging decorations are called *kasaboko*, and while they are now centerpieces of local festivals around the country, they originated as *yorishiro*.

#### What famous festivals in Japan use umbrellas?

There are festivals all over Japan that still use *kasa* today. Umbrellas decorated in cherry blossoms and camellias are used in the Yasurai Matsuri, an annual festival held at Imamiya Shrine in Kyoto, as implements to ward off disease by absorbing the god of pestilence and confining it within the shrine. Similarly, you can see Aoi Matsuri (Kamo-sai)<sup>3</sup> and Jidai Matsuri<sup>6</sup> processioners in Kyoto holding *furyu-gasa*, Japanese umbrellas decorated in a profusion of flowers. The Nagasaki Kunchi festival held in Nagasaki City each October also originated with the *kasaboko* town umbrellas. The festival features performances by individuals carrying and twirling elaborate, very heavy

100-kilogram *kasaboko* for each town. At the Hakata Dontaku festival, too, elaborate *kasaboko* appear as town symbols, and passing under one is said to bring blessings of good health and good fortune.

I am utterly fascinated with the *kasa* that decorate Japanese festivals and have studied them for a long time. Looking at Japanese festivals from the perspective of the *kasa* may be an entirely new way to enjoy them. If you have a chance to see a Japanese festival, I hope you won't miss the chance to take note of the *kasa*. 🍯

1. The Japanese characters for rainy season can be read as either *baiu* or *tsuyu*. This period of much rain generally occurs from early June to late July from Japan and the rest of East Asia to Southeast Asia.
2. Emperor Go-Shirakawa was born in 1127 and died in 1192. He was the 77<sup>th</sup> emperor of Japan.
3. Kamo-sai is a festival held at Kamigamo and Shimogamo Shrines in Kyoto. The official name is Aoi Matsuri, and it is one of the three most famous festivals in Kyoto. Held every May, it is also known for being the oldest festival in Kyoto.
4. Miko is a shrine maiden, one of the positions at a shrine. This individual serves the deity and assists the priest by performing chants and sacred dances held at the shrine and by reciting prayers.
5. Gion-goryoe is the old name for the Gion Festival, which is held at Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto. Originating as a festival to ward off epidemics and disaster, this one-month festival is held each year in July.
6. Jidai Matsuri is held annually on October 22 at Heian Shrine in Kyoto. The festival features a procession of some 2,000 Kyoto residents dressed in accurate costume representing each period from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century.



Flower-adorned umbrellas at Aoi Matsuri (Kamo-sai festival) in Kyoto.