

Aoi Matsuri ~The Hollyhock Flower Festival

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In May, the season of tender green, one of Japan's three greatest festivals, Aoi Matsuri, the Hollyhock Flower Festival, takes place at the Shimogamo and Kamigamo shrines in Kyoto. It originated from a 1,500-year-old ritual to pray for a huge harvest, and, from the Heian period in the Middle Ages, it has been carried out as a national event. Aoi Matsuri is one of the most essential and historical festivals in Japan.

The highlight of the festival is the Ceremony on the Road (Roto-no-gi), where people in traditional, noble costumes walk the long distance from Kyoto Imperial Palace and the Shimogamo shrine to the Kamigamo shrine. Chokushi, the Emperor's messenger, visits these two Shinto shrines to pray, followed by Saioh, the princess, accompanied by government officials and gorgeous ox carriages, working as a Shrine maiden. The long queue of colorful dresses and flowers is brilliant like a rainbow, and it stands out in the cityscape. The fantastic scenery and the beautiful, honorable people seem to have emerged from a picture scroll. Like a fantasy it attracts our gaze.

Other parts of the festival include the Ceremony Inside the Shrine (Shato-no-gi) and the Pre-Ceremony (Zengi), where we can see traditional Shinto-style rituals: Yabusame, Japanese classical archery on horse; Misogi, riverside rites to cleanse sin from the soul; and Mikagematsuri, a sacred dance performance in the Shimogamo shrine. These rituals transport us back into old-world Japan of roughly 1,000 years ago.

In fact, this festival was initially called Kamo Matsuri after its main location. Since its inception, members of the noble queue have always been decorated with hollyhock leaves (Aoi in Japanese), which symbolize the Kamo shrine. For this reason, in the Edo period, it came to be called Aoi Matsuri. It is increasingly popular, and in fact, these days it is difficult to secure a place to see the ceremony, as many people from all over the world attend. The popularity of Aoi Matsuri is indeed alive and growing. As the years go by, the extravagant decoration of the festival remains unchanged, and with modern touches, it is especially lovely today.

As mentioned above, this festival has a deep history in Japan. It appears in Genji monogatari (The Tale of Genji), the most famous classic literature from the Heian period, written by Murasaki-shikibu. In Chapter 9, "Aoi (Heart-to-Heart)," Genji's wife, Lady Aoi, goes to see Roto-no-gi, where she encounters his ex-girlfriend, Lady Rokujo. A struggle ensues, and Lady Rokujo puts a curse on Lady Aoi.

The festival also appears in Waka, Japanese short, classical poetry, which has a structure of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables.

—としをへて かけしあふひは かはらねど けふのかざしは めづらしきかな
(『詩歌和歌集』・大蔵卿長房)

As the years go by,/ Decorated Aoi/ Has been still unchanged,/ But today's accessory/ Is especially lovely.

The word "Aoi" was pronounced "Afufi" those days, which was the same as "The day we meet". Therefore, "Aoi" was often used like a pun to imply the lover. The author of this Waka had felt that this festival had always been the same, but, perhaps, did find that year's one so special, as his girlfriend attended it.

To summarize, Aoi Matsuri has been familiar in Japan, being protected and loved for over a millennium. The extraordinary, spectacular scene will surely fascinate your eyes. Visit Kyoto to see, hear, feel, and enjoy the admirable atmosphere of Japanese tradition!