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From Amusement to Fire Prevention: The Kite Market of Ōji Inari Shrine

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Today, the kite market held by both Ōji Inari shrine and Shōzoku Inari shrine on the days of the horse in February is strongly associated with the *hibuse* kites that are sold by both shrines. However, I showed in a previous paper¹ that at the beginning of this kite market, the *hibuse* kites did not yet exist and the creation of the kite market and the creation of the first *hibuse* kites were clearly divided in time. Indeed, the kite market was an attraction meant for the kite aficionados of every age and every social rank and which probably started in the late 19th century. It was not the only one, for example, in this image (fig. 1) reproduced on the cover of the magazine *Kamigata*, the *hatsu-uma* festival of the Tamatsukuri Inari shrine (玉造稲荷神社) of Osaka is also associated with kites. However, it is difficult to date this image, so it is hard to say which Inari shrine, Osaka or Tokyo, started it first. As for the *hibuse* kites, they seem to have appeared in the first half of the 20th Century at the Ōji Inari shrine and around 1974 at the Shōzoku Inari Shrine². The precise date and the reason why the Ōji Inari shrine's amulet-kites were first created are not clear yet, but according to the historical documents we found, we put forward the hypothesis that it followed the 1923 Great Kantō earthquake during which Tokyo was devastated by fires. The oldest testimony we have so far of a *hibuse* kite is from the Ono-Shō-tako-ya; its founder, Ono Shōji 小野庄司 (1897-1957), first visited the kite market of the Ōji Inari shrine around 1926-27, and it seems that *hibuse* kites were already being distributed by the Ōji Inari shrine at that time. Then, through the 20th century, the three elements “Ōji”, “kites” and “anti-fire” became more and more associated in people's mind until today, a time when people go to the kite market specifically to get the now famous *hibuse* kites.

¹ ラリ・セシル「王子稲荷神社と装束稲荷神社の凧市と火伏凧—日本の凧文化を支えるイベント—」『鹿島美術研究』第35号別冊, 2018年11月, pp.186-195 (Cecile Laly, “The kite market of Ōji Inari shrine and Shōzoku Inari shrine: an event that supports Japanese kite culture”, *Kajima bijutsu kenkyū*, no 35, November 2018, pp. 186-195).

² This dating is based on the historical documents we have found so far, but we do have to mention that our dating is challenging the oral testimonies of the local people who claim a longer history for both the market and the *hibuse* kites.

The kite market is held on the same day as the Festival of the Ōji Inari shrine, which happens to be a day on which several traditional ceremonies and events meant to protect against fire all around Japan take place. Besides, as the proverb “Fires and disputes are the flowers of Edo” (「火事と喧嘩は江戸の華」) succinctly states, Edo-Tokyo has known a great number of fire disasters through centuries. So seeking protection, both practical and magical, against these repetitive disasters has a long history in the city. But we need to consider, more carefully, the fires in the Ōji area during the 20th century, that is to say, when we think *hibuse* kites appeared.

In 1923, the fires that followed the Great Kantō earthquake seem to have mainly spared the north part of Tokyo, Ōji included. A French correspondent of the newspaper *L'illustration* wrote: “If some neighborhoods in North and West Tokyo are nearly intact, the center and other neighborhoods are destroyed.”³ Indeed, according to the data of the Ministry of Home Affairs (内務省)⁴, no one died from fires in Ōji; and only a few buildings were destroyed by fire. Most of the casualties in this area were due to the earthquake itself. The fires in Tokyo that followed the earthquake were out-of-control, deadly and destructive, so the fact that Ōji did not suffer much from them, could have created the basis for a belief in an amulet-kite.

Then, during the war, the north of Tokyo, such as in other parts of the city, was targeted by aerial bombardments, but it seems that the fire created by the bombardments on the 13th of April stopped at the doors of the Shōzoku Inari shrine; hence it was said that the shrine saved the inhabitants from the fire. A few years later, in order to commemorate the power of protection against fire of the Shōzoku Inari shrine during the war, Takahashi Benzō 高橋弁三, who was the President of the Ōji-Ginza Shopping Streets (*ōji-ginza shōten-gai*), ordered a painting from Kobayashi Hei.ichi 小林兵一, an art professor of Ōji junior high-school (today Ōji-Sakura high-school); this painting was exhibited in the Shōzoku Inari shrine for decades⁵. Then, around 1959, postcards were made of the painting; it was part of a set with other postcards showing a reproduction of the ukiyo-e of the *kitsunebi* visiting the Enoki tree on New Year by Hiroshige and

³ « Si certains quartiers du Nord et de l'Ouest de Tokio sont à peu près intacts, le centre et les autres quartiers sont détruits » (A. P., *L'illustration. Journal Universel*, no 4208, 27 octobre 1923, p. 405).

⁴ 諸井孝文、武村雅之「関東地震（1923年9月1日）による被害要因別死者数の推定」『日本地震工学会論文集』第4巻第4号2004年p. 21-45 (Moroi Takafumi, Takemura Masayuki, “Mortality Estimation by Causes of Death Due to the 1923 Kanto Earthquake”, *Journal of the Japan Association for Earthquake Engineering*, vol. 4, no 4, 2004, p. 21-45).

⁵ After its completion, the painting was hung in the Shōzoku Inari shrine for several decades until about 3 years ago when it was brought in for restoration by Takahashi Hiroshi 高橋宏, the grandson of Benzō. Therefore, Takahashi retired and moved from Kita-ku to Adachi-ku before giving the painting back to the shrine; since then, the painting seems to have disappeared.

photographs of the contemporary shrine and its surrounding. In addition, on the cover of the postcard set, a graphic showed how the fire of the 13th of April 1945 stopped once it arrived in front of the Shōzoku Inari shrine (fig. 2), thus reinforcing the idea that the shrine had a special power for protection against fire.

Therefore, we conclude that if our dating is correct, it means that the belief in the power of the amulet-kite was created and emphasized during the 20th century by using the occurrence of repeated disasters and the relative luck of the Ōji area from the point of view in that they escaped these fires.

Figures:



Fig. 1:

Attributed to Yoshitoyo, *Hatsuuma Festival at Inari (Sugiyama at the south of Osaka Castle)*, cover of *Kamigata*, n° 14, February, 1932, Kimura Kaoru Collection. Information regarding the date of the creation of the image is not mentioned in the magazine.

芳豊《初午稻荷祭（大阪城南杉山）》『上方』第14号（1932年2月）表紙，木村薫蔵。



Fig. 2:

Cover of the set of postcards of the Shōzoku Inari shrine, circa 1959

装束稲荷の繪葉書セットの表紙, 1959年頃