

Aoi Matsuri by David Burgess

I was in Kyoto a few years ago on my 70th birthday and planned to see the famous Aoi Matsuri (Hollyhock Festival), which takes place on the 15th May every year. It is one of three major festivals in Kyoto and dates back to Heian times and before, following terrible storms that ravaged the country. The Emperor decided to appease the wrath of the gods and sent a messenger

from the Imperial palace to the two major shrines in the north of Kyoto; namely the Shimogamo and Kamigamo shrines. The festival represents the Imperial Messengers Procession re-enacted in Heian period costume and is often accompanied by displays of horse riding and archery at Kamigamo shrine.

The procession includes 511 courtiers, 36 horses, 4 ox

carts and 2 carriages and stretches for over a kilometre and comprises two main sections: the Imperial Messengers retinue and the holy maiden who became the high priestess of the shrine. In early days she would be one of the Emperor's daughters and a princess.

The procession includes the Suo, a fore-runner dressed as an Edo period samurai and the Norijiri (horse riders),



Procession leaving the Imperial Palace.



Ritual offerings and escort.



Musicians.



Chokushi (Imperial messenger).



Leading Gissha (Ox cart).



Yamashiro governor.

Aoi Matsuri.....continued

followed by police officers and court administrators with guards who look after the offertory boxes. Next amongst other courtiers is the mounted governor of Yamashiro (the old name of Kyoto prefecture) and the horse to be offered (live offering) to the deities after demonstrating its prowess in front of the shrines, as a form of appeasement and the ritual offerings complete



Colourful Umbrella.

with special officers. This is followed by the Gisha, an ox-hauled carriage of the Emperor and high ranking courtiers, decorated with wisterias and irises. There are warriors who form the Imperial guard, some perform the dances at the shrines, followed by the Imperial Messenger (Chokushi), mounted on a horse and carrying a gold sword complete with followers and



Shimogamo shrine.

spare horse. There are the floral umbrella carriers and variety of musicians and the courtier carrying the ritual address.

The second part of the procession includes the Saio-Dai and her retinue. The Saio-Dai or holy maiden used to be one of the Emperors daughters, who after religious training became high priestess of the shrine. She is borne in a palanquin carried by a number of men and is followed by warriors and court ladies with high ranking ladies carried in carriages together with sacred shrine maidens who perform the rituals at the shrines. The motif for the procession includes orange leaves, cherries and wisteria in addition to the hollyhock. Finally the procession closes with the second Gisha.

A truly wonderful spectacle. Special seating is available at the Kamigamo shrine to view the pre-procession fun and games, largely horse riding and archery (Yabusame).



Saio Dai (Shrine Princess).



Trailing Gisha (Ox cart).



Kamigamo shrine.

Jousting Heian style. (Courtesy of M. Fedley)