

## A Historical Walk Around Kyoto

Photo by Masayoshi Masuda



### Aoi Festival

During the planting season, Aoi Festival is held for good harvests. Aoi Festival is the oldest of the three biggest festivals (Aoi, Gion and Jidai festivals) in Kyoto, and has been discontinued several times since the first festival was held in the 6<sup>th</sup> century because of battles in Japan and World War II. However, there has been a long tradition of imperial costumes and customs here.

This festival includes a horse back archery show, purification ceremony and a parade in May. This parade as shown in the photo is held on May 15. It consists of approx. 510 people, 36 horses, 4 cows and 2 carriages, and runs 1 kilometer from the front to the back. They go to Shimogamo Shrine and Kamigamo Shrine from Kyoto Imperial Palace to pray for good harvests. Everything used for the parade is covered with heart shaped Aoi leaves (Japanese hollyhock). These leaves are believed to have all sorts of powers.

#### The Highlight of the Parade

The highlight of the parade is not only a man sitting in for the imperial messenger in a men's line but also a woman sitting in for the Saio (priestess) in a women's line. The women's line dates back to 810, and continued for approx. 400 years.

An unmarried daughter of the emperor, a servant of God termed Saio, had been a symbol of this line until the emperor lost a fight with the Kamakura Shogunate (feudal government) in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

This line came back again in 1956. Nowadays, a Kyoto woman is chosen as the Saio-dai, which means a substitute of the Saio. She rides on a sacred carriage with a lot of followers wearing the colorful clothing of the imperial court.

#### The Widespread Superstition for the Origin of This Festival

This festival, which predates the founding of Kyoto, was originally held by the powerful Kamo clan. The Kamo clan supported moving the emperor to Kyoto for the relocation of the capital in 794. Since then, this festival has become a national festival.

One legend suggests that the emperor considered that crops were damaged because this was God's doing at the Kamo clan's shrines (Kamigamo Shrine and Shimogamo Shrine). He let his imperial messenger ride a horse with bells to the shrines. They had a good harvest that year.

This is why horses are very important and used for ceremonies in these shrines for this festival.

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