Deep within the mountainous interior of central Honshu, the main island in the Japanese archipelago, lies a small agricultural and commercial town called Furukawa. It is located in the center of a narrow basin, surrounded by rice paddies, and further enveloped by steep mountain slopes. The core community, which has for centuries been defined by its territorial affiliation with a local guardian deity, presently numbers about 7000 people.

This is not the idyllic farm village so frequently chosen as the focus of past anthropological studies (see for example Embree 1939; Beardsley, Hall, and Ward 1959; Dore 1978); nor is it the kind of populous urban environment that has served as the context for more recent analyses of Japanese social interaction (e.g. Bestor 1989; Kondo 1990; Robertson 1991). As a small provincial town, Furukawa lies somewhere in between, maintaining the close-knit insularity associated with smaller communities but exhibiting the kind of organizational complexity characteristic of larger demographic units.

Yet to see Furukawa merely as occupying some transitional point along a continuum of increasing population density would be to deny its special character. Unlike a farm village, it brings households of various occupational and economic categories into close association; unlike a metropolitan neighborhood engulfed by urban growth, it has managed to maintain an independent communal identity over a period of several hundred years. In addition, the distance separating Furukawa from major urban areas, combined with the ruggedness of the surrounding topography and heavy winter snowfall, has historically encouraged among its people a distinct sense of eco-
onomic and administrative autonomy. This should not be taken to imply, however, that Furukawa has been immune to larger historical forces emanating from beyond its mountain perimeter; indeed, this book is largely concerned with how the local people have articulated these forces, specifically through the medium of communal ritual.

The pace of life in Furukawa is slower than in the congested urban lowlands, and its residents generally exhibit the kind of relaxed congeniality so often attributed to country people the world over. Even so, at certain critical moments, particularly when their own interests are threatened by outside forces, they are said to reveal another side of themselves—an unruly and aggressive attitude rather infamously known as “Furukawa yancha.”

The word “yancha,” meaning “mischief” or “unruliness,” is generally reserved for disobedient or rambunctious children. In Furukawa, however, it is most commonly associated with adult proclivities; in fact, “Furukawa yancha” has assumed special significance as a defining element of the local character. The term elicits both positive and negative connotations, depending on one’s point of view: it is invoked with pride by the townspeople in describing themselves, but is often used derisively by residents of neighboring towns and villages in denouncing what they consider a rough, uncivilized quality. Furukawa yancha is variously described as “a rebellious or unruly attitude,” “making one’s intentions clear and insisting that others comply with them,” or simply “defying authority” (Kuwatani 1969: 23–25; Sugata 1975:8; Sonoda 1975:71, 1988:53; Sonoda and Uno 1979:176; Kaba 1984:24–44; Mabuchi 1990:57; Morishita 1991:6).

The quintessential expression of this rebellious attitude is a ritualized performance known as the “okoshi daiko,” or “rousing drum.” The name refers to a large, barrel-shaped drum fixed atop a huge rectangular framework made of overlapping wooden beams. Every year on the night of April 19, the eve of the festival dedicated to the local guardian deity, the entire structure is borne through the narrow streets in a raucous procession by a mass of half-naked, inebriated men. Prominent members of the community are obliged to ride upon the structure, while teams of younger men, representing the various component neighborhoods, charge out at it from behind as it passes through their respective territories. Each team is armed
with a drum of its own—a smaller version lashed tightly to a stout pole. This is called a “tsuke daiko,” or “attaching drum,” since the basic objective is for team members to “attach” it to the rear of the main drum structure as it proceeds along its course.

The position directly behind the main drum is highly esteemed, and reaching it is a formidable task. The successful team must not only vie with several other neighborhood groups having similar intentions; it must also drive through the defenses of a gang of burly guardians positioned directly behind the main drum structure to keep the challengers at bay. All the action takes place within the confines of a narrow street, and the crush of bodies at the rear of the structure is intense. The participants can become very aggressive in performing their roles, and injuries are stoically accepted as inevitable consequences of the ritual experience.

In recent decades this rather unusual event has developed into a popular spectacle promoted by town planners as a means of drawing tourists to the area, thereby bolstering the local economy. Prior to Japan’s period of rapid economic growth after the Second World War, however, there was no tourist industry to speak of, and the okoshi daiko was staged primarily by and for the local residents themselves.

Indeed, the ritual appears to have been considerably more boisterous in the prewar era. Anyone having a score to settle would wait for the night of the okoshi daiko, when seemingly random acts of violence would likely go unnoticed in the general confusion (Kaba 1984:35–36; Furukawa-chō Kankō Kyōkai 1984:80–81). The neighborhood teams were not always content simply to make contact with the main drum structure: they sometimes tried to cause its collapse, thereby bringing down its elite retinue (Öno 1973b, 1976a:3). The massive drum itself was known to swerve on occasion, “inadvertently” crashing into the homes of greedy landlords, usurious merchants, or meddlesome administrative officials. Likewise, the tsuke daiko teams, in charging recklessly toward their goal, sometimes ran wide of the mark and ended up ramming their poles through an adjacent wall or storefront. Often the same establishments were victimized year after year. One of the more notable targets for such assaults was the local police headquarters.

Curiously, however, an examination of the written record reveals no evidence of such behavior prior to the late 1800s when Japan’s
period of rapid modernization began. The *okoshi daiko* of that time, when mentioned at all, is described simply as a single drum that passed through town at dawn to alert the townspeople that the main event, a Shinto-based religious observance, was about to begin (Tomita 1968 [1874]:399–400; Ōno 1973b; Furukawa-chō 1984: 655–656). Nowhere is there any indication of the raucous, unruly behavior it later came to embody. What caused the transformation? Indigenous accounts offer no satisfactory explanation, attributing the ritual to a seemingly spontaneous manifestation of Furukawa *yancha* (Kaba 1984:36; Furukawa-chō Kankō Kyōkai 1984:79–80; Furukawa-chō Kyōiku Iinkai 1990:207).

In fact the festival as a whole is widely assumed to embody a time-honored tradition, which has been faithfully handed down to the present from several centuries ago. This reflects a more general tendency to associate the term “ritual” with unvarying and repetitive behavior. There is of course a parallel inclination within the social sciences, where ritual tends to be viewed as merely a means of reproducing the social system, and religion in general as a basically conservative device for maintaining the sociopolitical status quo. The instrumental value of religious ritual as a means of adapting to—or perhaps even introducing—changes in the sociopolitical order remains largely unexplored.

The present study is guided by the assumption that ritual, as the active and physical expression of ideology through a symbolic medium, does not simply constitute the mechanical execution of preestablished patterns. Rather, it is an ongoing performative discourse whose contents are continually amended, reinterpreted, or transformed according to the needs of its practitioners—needs that clearly change over time in response to changing sociopolitical and economic conditions. Indeed, it is this adaptable quality that explains why rituals like the *okoshi daiko* have demonstrated such remarkable longevity, for without it they would inevitably be abandoned as wastes of time.

In the following chapters I will demonstrate that the *okoshi daiko* as it exists in the present day is only the most recent manifestation in a long series of developmental changes. I maintain that this, or any other, ritual must be considered within the context of larger historical patterns in order to grasp its deeper underlying significance. A historical perspective is thus vital to any analysis of ritual as a form of social practice.
Structure, Agency, and Practice Theory

Social scientists have long debated the capacity of individuals to shape the course of their own destinies as measured against the deterministic influence of the social system that encompasses and constrains them. Functionalists in the mold of Radcliffe-Brown tended to represent society as a coercive, inhibiting structure, equipped with institutions and ideologies for perpetuating itself through time. Individuals existing within this structure were seen as being wholly conditioned by its relationships and values, mechanically reproducing the structure through daily interaction. In accordance with this basic paradigm, ritual was explained as a means of reinforcing certain collectively held values and attitudes in the minds of its participants, thereby promoting social integration (Durkheim 1915; Radcliffe–Brown 1945; Turner 1957; Bellah 1968; Douglas 1973).

A major criticism of this approach has been its seeming denial of human agency—the propensity for individuals to manipulate the structure to their own advantage, or even to comprehend the forces that dominate and constrain them (Lukes 1975:293–297; Giddens 1979, 1984; Ortner 1984:144–145). The alternative viewpoint, more recently in vogue, insists that while individual members are undoubtedly influenced by their sociocultural milieu, they nevertheless have the ability to introduce or negotiate change in pursuit of their own interests. Individuals, in other words, are agents, not only in the sense of reproducing the social structure, but in transforming it as well. Structure may thus be considered enabling as well as constraining, insofar as it furnishes the actor with the means and opportunities to act:

Every process of action is a production of something new, a fresh act; but at the same time all action exists in continuity with the past, which supplies the means of its initiation. Structure thus is not to be conceptualised as a barrier to action, but as essentially involved in its production (Giddens 1979:70, emphasis in the original).

This enabling aspect is implicit in Ortner’s (1984, 1989) delineation of “practice theory,” which, while conceding that the social system exerts a powerful and pervasive influence, nevertheless
acknowledges the importance of human agency in shaping the development of social institutions and historical events. The practice approach articulates with efforts to incorporate a historical dimension into the structural analysis of social systems by viewing structure and agency as interacting or recursive entities, each continually redefining the other over time (Sahlins 1985; Comaroff 1985; Ortner 1989; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). Ortner, in fact, envisions an eventual synthesis of anthropological and historical studies, guided by the recognition that “[h]istory is not simply something that happens to people, but something they make—within, of course, the very powerful constraints of the system within which they are operating” (1984:159).

The two disciplines would appear to be most clearly distinguishable in terms of methodology: historians rely primarily on written documents in attempting to comprehend the past; anthropologists combine direct observation and experience with informant interviews in their efforts to understand existing relationships and conditions. But such a hasty distinction masks large areas of overlap wherein each of these disciplines is influenced and informed by the other. One of the most obvious examples of a methodological crossover is the ethnohistorical approach, which Wood (1990:81) defines simply as “the use of historical documents and historical method in anthropological research.” Ethnohistorical studies, he continues, “are based on historical documents, but they are written with anthropological insight.”

This, however, raises a further discrepancy—one relating to representational concerns. From an anthropologist’s perspective, focusing so extensively on the written record risks an undue bias toward the attitudes and opinions of the literary elite. Historians themselves have long debated the issue of where their proper focus should lie—on the major political, military, and intellectual figures who come to define an era, or on the so-called “common people” who constitute the vast majority of the population in the polities concerned. Anthropologists, for their part, have traditionally confined themselves to the study of small, seemingly insular communities, devoting scant attention to the larger economic and political forces that impinge upon and transform the lives of the people within them.

The practice approach aims at a reconciliation of these two opposing viewpoints by relating local sociopolitical and economic conditions to larger historical processes and investigating how new
developments are received, resisted, appropriated, and/or exploited by local actors in addressing their immediate needs. Ortner (1984:143) asserts that anthropology is particularly amenable to a practice-oriented approach due to its traditional focus on the micro-societal level: “The attempt to view other systems from ground level is the basis, perhaps the only basis, of anthropology’s distinctive contribution to the human sciences.” Furthermore, “it is our location ‘on the ground’ that puts us in a position to see people not simply as passive reactors to and enactors of some ‘system,’ but as active agents and subjects in their own history.”

Even so, a historical perspective requires the kind of extended time depth generally missing from ethnographic fieldwork, with its emphasis on the documentation of currently existing relationships and conditions. In fact this lack of a time dimension may partly explain the tendency to view religion and ritual as conservative forces, in that the ethnographer has not remained in the field long enough to directly observe their transformative potential. Any consideration of ritual as an instrument of sociopolitical change must therefore combine fieldwork with an analysis of the available historical data (see Bloch 1986:10–11). Sahlins (1985), Cohn (1987:73), and Comaroff and Comaroff (1992:31) have called for a historical anthropology capable of dealing with structural transformations induced by outside contact and the cultural responses they engender among indigenous populations.

This is the perspective Ortner (1989) adopts in her analysis of the strategies behind the first Sherpa temple foundings. Ortner suggests that incorporation into the Nepalese state and ultimately into the sphere of influence of the British Raj held certain advantages for Sherpa “small people”:

[T]he “imposition” of state power from the outside was also an active appropriation of such power from the inside. Thus I will show how the Sherpas used both the British in India and the Nepal state in Kathmandu to bring in outside wealth and to achieve certain kinds of success, which in turn were celebrated in the foundings of the monasteries. (Ortner 1989:99–100)

In fact, Ortner goes so far as an attempt to “de-victimize the Sherpas (or any other group at the receiving end of world capitalist expansion) as much as possible” (1989:100). In line with Giddens’ con-
tention as noted earlier, she suggests that the imposition of authority from the outside represented a form of constraint, but also an opportunity. Thus, she maintains, “it is important for anthropologists . . . to recognize the ways in which people are always reinterpreting their situation, acting on it in their own terms, and making the most they can—materially, morally, and in every other way—out of it” (1989:100).

Bell (1992) adopts a similar position in her treatment of ritual as a form of social practice. She argues that participation in ritual is not simply the passive acceptance of a dominant ideology; it is a matter of self-interested appropriation which affords its participants some flexibility in negotiating the terms of their involvement. Furthermore, a shared symbolic pattern does not necessarily suggest a shared understanding of its meaning, as participants in the same ritual may interpret its symbols differently. “People reproduce relationships of power and domination, but not in a direct, automatic, or mechanistic way; rather, they reproduce them through their particular construal of those relations, a construal that affords the actor the sense of a sphere of action, however minimal” (Bell 1992:84).

This is encouraging from a humanitarian point of view because it affords the disadvantaged or disenfranchised some leverage in dealing with the more powerful forces that seek to constrain them. The “small people” are no longer to be seen as hapless victims of historical precedent, but as actors who are fully conscious, and routinely avail themselves, of the opportunities which structure affords them. In fact Giddens (1979:72) suggests that failing to recognize such inherent potential constitutes a “derogation of the lay actor”; he objects to the tendency among social scientists to regard actors “as cultural dopes or mere ‘bearers of a mode of production,’ with no worthwhile understanding of their surroundings or the circumstances of their action.”

Individual actors are credited with a more sophisticated understanding of their situation in Scott’s (1976, 1985) analysis of peasant resistance in Southeast Asia. Through the anthropological methods of fieldwork and participant observation, Scott is led to conclude that focusing only on instances of organized rebellion is highly misleading. Resistance, he argues, is most commonly manifested in the form of individual, unorganized acts such as pilfering, false compliance, slander, and vandalism, as these may be the only means of opposition available to peasants living under a repressive regime. “To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to under-
stand what much of the peasantry does ‘between revolts’ to defend its interests as best it can” (1985:29).

Such tendencies are not always easy to recognize, especially when dealing with societies of the past. As previously noted, written accounts are typically biased toward the literary elite, ignoring the attitudes and perceptions of subordinate members. To complicate matters, Scott (1990:87) alludes to “the more profound difficulty presented by earnest efforts of subordinate groups to conceal their activities and opinions, which might expose them to harm.” He employs the term “hidden transcript” in referring to the more antagonistic or subversive sentiments which the adherents generally keep to themselves, and which for this reason seldom find their way into the official record. This coincides with Wood’s (1990:83) assertion that “only a small part of what takes place is observed; much less is recorded; and what has survived is surely not always the most important.”

Thus the methodological problem that presents itself is how to achieve an accurate understanding of conditions and attitudes as they actually existed—how to recover the “hidden transcript.” Scott himself hints at a solution; he notes that glimpses of the hidden transcript may be revealed during public events that confer some form of disguise or anonymity, thereby shielding the identity of the actors. “Rumor, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemisms—a good part of the folk culture of subordinate groups—fit this description” (Scott 1990:19, emphasis added).

The present analysis will focus on communal ritual as an opportunity for expressing discontent or negotiating more favorable conditions. As will be described more completely in the next chapter, the mass assemblages and atmosphere of temporary license associated with Shinto shrine festivals afford the very type of anonymity to which Scott was alluding, particularly when combined with the cover of darkness. It is vital, therefore, to consider such contexts in attempting to grasp the processes of sociopolitical change, especially as they invoke the forces of authority and resistance.

**Ritual and Resistance**

The ritual expression of rebellious tendencies is well documented in the anthropological literature, but the effort to link such tendencies with genuine sociopolitical change has been far less evident. Gluckman (1954) originally coined the term “rituals of rebellion” in refer-
ring to ceremonial occasions in which customary deference toward authority was temporarily abandoned, allowing participants to openly express their hostilities toward the dominant elite. Following the standard functionalist perspective, he argued that these seemingly subversive rituals actually helped maintain the existing social order through the cathartic release of divisive tensions. This has been labeled the “safety-valve theory” (Coser 1956:39–48); it explains ritual rebellion as an opportunity for the politically subordinate to vent their aggressive tendencies, thereby staving off the emergence of more serious forms of opposition. In other words, “ritual controls by forestalling overt rebellion or other threats to social unity” (Bell 1992:172).

Scott (1990:178) objects to such assertions, arguing that they risk confusing intentionality with result. Taking the carnival as an example, he notes that such a complex social event “cannot be said to be simply this or that as if it had a given, genetically programmed, function. It makes far greater sense to see carnival as the ritual site of various forms of social conflict and symbolic manipulation, none of which can be said, prima facie, to prevail.” Furthermore, he wonders, if such rituals actually stave off the possibility of outright rebellion, as the safety-valve theory suggests, why are there so many instances of the authorities trying to control or suppress their performance (Scott 1985:331, 1990:178–179)?

In fact several recent theorists have addressed the use of ritual by subordinated peoples in demonstrating their opposition to a dominant ideology (Comaroff 1985; Ortner 1989; Kelly and Kaplan 1990; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). The recognized effects of such “rituals of resistance,” however, still tend to be restricted to political consciousness-raising, as the following excerpt implies:

If a system of domination controls the representation of what is possible and what is natural, then a ritual of resistance breaks the hegemony over the subjective consciousness of the ritual participants. It makes them conscious of the oppression and allows them to envision new communities and possibilities. (Kelly and Kaplan 1990:135)

Any attempt to act upon this new awareness would presumably be manifested in other forms; ritual *per se* is denied a direct, instrumental significance.
Bell (1992:71) attributes such tendencies to the way “ritual” has been constructed as an analytic category. She notes that Western scholarship consistently associates ritual with purely symbolic, as opposed to instrumental, activity. This fosters the impression that rituals of resistance serve merely as forms of catharsis which yield no practical result. But if such rituals are attributed with instrumental efficacy, what then distinguishes them from other activities? Is ritual an exclusive category or a dimension of all social behavior?

Bell offers a solution to this impasse by suggesting an alternative conceptual framework, focusing not on “ritual” as a discrete analytical category, but on “ritualization” as “a culturally strategic way of acting” (1992:8). She describes ritualization as the privileging of certain activities by ascribing to them a special sanctity or importance, thereby distinguishing them from other, more mundane forms of behavior. “As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane,’ and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors” (1992:74). The actors may then attempt to appropriate these privileged activities for their own purposes. The act of ritualization itself, in other words, has instrumental value.

This also solves the question of whether ritual should be regarded as a means of maintaining the status quo or of effecting sociopolitical change; it could just as readily serve in either capacity, depending on the actors’ inclinations. Of course, different actors will undoubtedly harbor competing interests. Ritual, then, becomes not just the mechanical expression of previously existing patterns, but a forum for expressing opinions, airing grievances, and promoting one’s own agenda.

Gerholm (1988) presages many of these sentiments in delineating a postmodernist approach to the study of ritual. He defines ritual as “formal, rigidly prescribed action”; its effectiveness derives from “the focussing and intensifying of attention, public and/or individual” (1988:198, emphasis in the original). Rituals, Gerholm insists, are not usually the work of one “author” but the result of many individual contributions. Those contributions are made on the basis of individual interpretations of the “point” of the ritual and/or on the basis of the external, non-ritual uses of the
ritual that a certain individual may see: an opportunity to enhance one’s prestige etc. (1988:200)

These ideas are accompanied by a strong assertion that the study of the way individuals use ritual requires a historical perspective.

In keeping with this line of reasoning, the present analysis will assign an instrumental role to the ritual performance itself. It will adopt a historical perspective in examining how the residents of Furukawa have employed their local shrine festival as an effective means of negotiating sociopolitical and economic change. More specifically, it will focus on how a ritual component of the festival—the okoshi daiko—emerged as a vehicle of popular protest, which occasionally transcended the bounds of the “purely symbolic” by escalating into genuine acts of politically motivated violence.

Thus, while this study focuses on a Shinto shrine festival, my primary interest lies in symbolic forms of unity and opposition, as well as the larger issue of the role of ritual in adapting to changing sociopolitical and economic conditions. Before proceeding with my specific case example, however, it is necessary to ask an important question: why should such sentiments be expressed through ritual rather than some other medium? I shall address this question through a consideration of the Japanese concept of matsuri as communal ritual.