

The Calendar of Village Festivals: Japan*

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Two matters must be kept in mind when discussing the topic "The Calendar of Village Festivals: Japan." One is that a number of calendars are used in Japan and the other is that a number of observances which are important to Japanese are no longer on the scale of a festival. The term *festival* is used for the Japanese *matsuri*.

The national holiday on 11 February is called National Founding Day to observe the beginning of the reign of Jimmu Tennō, the first Emperor of Japan. According to that calendar, 1984 is the year 2644. A few Japanese use that date on cards for New Year greetings as a matter of sentiment, but there is no other observance.

The present year 1984 is Showa 59 in the reign of the present Emperor. His birthday is a national holiday. Most official documents use the Showa year, but months and days follow the official calendar. The present official calendar, adopted in 1872, is similar to the one used in the West with days ranging from 28 to 31 in twelve months. New Year's Day in cities, schools, and government offices is observed according to it.

The lunar calendar with 30 days to the month and two intercalary months coming twice during five years is followed by most shrine observances, the 15th Day or the time of the full moon being the most important. It happens that 1984 has two Tenth Months, but no festivals are held in the intercalary month. Many towns and villages select a date one month later than the official calendar for a festival, a sort of compromise between the lunar and official calendars.

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The solar calendar introduced from China to Japan has 24 periods or half months, each with fifteen days. The last day of one period and the first day of the next form a sort of joint. These days are called *hare-bi* or rest days and are usually observed as such in rural areas. The eve of Risshun, 3 February, is celebrated as the beginning of spring. In 1984 Risshun comes two days after New Year's Day by the lunar calendar. Shunbun, the vernal equinox, and Shūbun, the autumnal equinox, are marked as Higan on the official calendar and are legal holidays. But Higan lasts for seven days, the dates observed as holidays being the middle days of those weeks.

The sexagesimal calendar, also introduced from China, is a cycle of ten trunks 干 and twelve twigs 支. The ten trunks are Elder Brother and Younger Brother of each of the five elements: Wood, Fire, Soil, Metal, and Water. The twelve twigs are the twelve animals of the Zodiac: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Hare, Dragon, Serpent, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Cock, Dog, and Boar. The year 1984 is the year of Elder Brother Wood and Rat. This starts a new cycle in which the ten trunks and twelve twigs run concurrently and requires sixty years to complete. A Japanese man who has lived a full sixty years is said to start as an infant again and can wear red *tabi* (socks) and a red sleeveless jacket. The names of the zodiac animals are applied to days as well as to years, and formerly they were applied to the hours of the day, two hours to a period.

The 1st Day of the Horse by the lunar calendar is the date for the big Inari Festival at Fushimi Shrine near Kyoto, and it is also observed in many smaller shrines all over the country. The selection of this date for a festival is thus according to a combination of the lunar and sexagesimal calendars. The sexagesimal cycle is consulted when selecting special days such as those for weddings, opening a business, or going on a journey.

The solar, lunar, and sexagesimal calendars and lucky and unlucky days are noted in small characters below or at the sides of numbers on the big commercial art calendars, and a complete schedule of various calendar days is published each year in Japan for those who have the time and inclination to delve into their mysteries.

There is another calendar, which might be called the natural calendar, for village folk. The flight of birds and lengthening shadows foretell the coming of winter and the time for harvest. The return of the birds and the configuration of melting snow on the mountains fix the time to start work in the field or to go into the forest to cut wood. The first call of the *uguisu*, the Japanese nightingale, in early spring encourages city folk. Its bright call is reproduced electrically and

sounded at stations along the way of commuters to assure them the bitter cold of *dai-kan*, the period of great cold ending on January 21 by the solar calendar, has passed.

Scenes in Japan are changing rapidly today and even villages are hard to find. Under the present policy of the central government, villages can get monetary and political advantages by joining towns, towns are joining cities for the same reasons, and even cities are pairing up. The postal service publishes a new atlas of Japan every year to bring place names up to date. Although old neighborhoods may still cling to old festival patterns, these vary from village to village. Yama-no-kami, the mountain deity, is said to descend to the rice paddy to become Ta-no-kami, the rice field deity in the spring. A farmer's wife near Kyoto will arise early in the morning to take a flask of sacred wine and flowers to her paddy to greet him. She will pour a little wine into the inlet for water to her field through which the Ta-no-kami will enter and she will lay the flowers on the water to greet him. The same event is celebrated with a procession at Aso shrine in Kumamoto. Old meanings for an observance may still be held at one place and are lost to a modern point of view at another. In other words, one can not generalize about customs at festivals in Japanese villages.

One fact remains constant—that is the purpose of a festival or *matsuri*. It is an occasion to which *kami*, a deity, is invited by people to enjoy food and entertainment together, after which the hosts make petitions to *kami* for guidance or protection and then send them on their way.

Some festivals are centered at a shrine, but most such festivals are organized by village patrons or prominent families who take turns for that responsibility, even to setting the date. Other festivals are centered in the home. There are also celebrations of *kō* 講, small groups who have their own schedules. Temples do not celebrate *matsuri*, but hold lectures or other cultural events. The large hall in the temple may open for a recital of traditional Japanese music. Some priests give instruction in calligraphy or tea ceremony. Some large temples have a little *azumaya*, a little house in the rear, built to accommodate tea ceremony. This study will present examples of the activities mentioned and a few other observances.

A festival at a shrine is like a bazaar with little stalls set up on its approach or on its grounds. There are trinkets to buy, tasty snacks to sample, and perhaps a juggler or other entertainment to enjoy. Most of the stalls are run by professionals who make their living by going from one festival to another in all kinds of weather to sell or to entertain. A special site for wrestling may be set apart on the shrine precincts for

wrestling. Young villagers match their strength to the cheers of the bystanders and for the entertainment of *kami*. Some believe that the outcome of a match is the result of the will of the *kami*. People who attend the festival will make a small offering at the shrine, pray, and perhaps buy an *o-fuda*, a paper or woodchip talisman with something written on it furnished by the shrine.

Everyone dresses up to go to a shrine festival. Young people have a chance to eye each other over, and frequently matches are made following such contacts. A whole group of folk tales have such a setting with a Cinderella-like ending. Parades at festivals are more apt to be seen in big towns or cities because of the expense entailed in putting them on.

The observance of New Year is centered in the home with only the family head perhaps paying a visit to the local shrine or temple. The decorations at the gate or entrance to the house are a relic of early times when a place was cleared around a tree and roped off to invite *kami* to descend. The bits of pine at the entrance to the house and the *shimenawa* hung above the door are distributed in turn by the leader of the neighborhood with the cost met by each family. The *shimenawa*, a thin straw rope hung with strips of white paper, are furnished by the shrine and hung to show that the house is ritually clean. The farmhouse itself has had soot removed from its rafters as early as December 8, but the *ōsōji*, the big house cleaning, all over Japan takes place on the day before New Year. This *ōsōji* goes on at offices and government buildings as well as at homes, and Japanese inns are madhouses with last minute cleaning before midnight on New Year's Eve.

New Year in Japan is actually a fifteen-day celebration, the first two of which are enjoyed by complete rest. That goes for restaurants as well as in homes. Enough New Year dishes have been prepared by the housewife so that she does not step foot in the kitchen for two days. Family members who are away at school or work or have homes apart all pay a visit to the family home during New Year. The special food at New Year is *mochi*, a cake made by pounding steamed glutinous rice. Three round cakes of it are flattened and placed on the family altar or in the ornamental alcove, the *tokonoma*, as offerings to *kami*. Each of the days in this period has its special food or observance. On the 15th Day, forecasts are made for the year's harvest and New Year ornaments are burned.

Japanese are not very specific when it comes to naming *kami*, and a number of them are called New Year Kami, but practices at New Year show that it is really ancestral spirits who are supposed to arrive. Some say that in the smoke of the bonfire on the night of the 15th the dim

figures of the beloved white-haired ancestral couple, the Takasago, can be seen departing.

Higan seems to be centered at temples because many graves are found on their grounds. But village graves are often at the approach to the village. Some big homes have a family grave plot in the corner of their yard. But all graves are cleaned and fresh flowers are placed by them at Higan. Priests usually go to homes to recite sutras for souls of the family dead journeying to nirvana. Priests are not asked to come to homes to recite sutras at New Year.

The *bon* festival is celebrated in cities from 15 to 17 July, but in the country *bon* comes one month later, according to the compromise calendar mentioned earlier. A mass exodus of people from cities crowds all public transportation with people on their way to family homes in the country. This is the time for family reunions of the spirits of the dead and of the living. Family graves are cleaned and a special altar is set up in the house for food offerings. Wild flowers gathered in the mountains are placed on the graves and on the *bon* altars. City folk pay a big price for such *bon-bana*, *bon* flowers, which are said to be set up for spirits to rest on. The special food for the altars and eaten by the family are cucumbers and eggplant. Some homes ask a Buddhist priest to come to their home to recite sutras for their dead. Yanagita Kunio, the late dean of folklore in Japan, said that Buddhist priests busy with sutras at Higan and *bon* must have little faith in the efficacy of the sutras because spirits of the family dead keep on coming home.

The *bon* dance held on each night of *bon* is joined by young and old, men and women. Dancers move in single file in a circle on an open place, singing as they dance. Singers stand by the drummers who keep time and sometimes a flute will accompany them. The dancers wear simple cotton *yukata*, summer kimono, and some of them may have a towel thrown over their heads and half hiding their faces.

According to the official calendar, 8 April is noted as Buddha's birthday, but it is not a holiday. However, this is definitely a Buddhist observance. The writer of this paper was asked once to lecture at the temple in a small town on this occasion. The program could not start until *zō sama*, the honored elephant, returned. It proved to be a small paper mâché elephant with a little figure of infant Buddha sitting under a canopy on its back. When the truck carrying them had made the rounds of the streets, the elephant was lifted down and set on a low stand. The little figure on its back was set in a basin of sweet wine, and people took turns dipping up the wine and pouring it over him. Then they gathered in the large hall of the temple for the meeting.

The writer had asked the priest what he wanted her to talk about,

but he left that to her to decide. Since the countryside was mostly fields of blooming tulips, she sketched briefly the history of Holland and its present industry of selling tulip bulbs. A local man followed the lecture with a selection of humorous folk tales. Such entertainment is enjoyed by adults in Japan.

Besides festivals at shrines or observances at temples, a number of small *kō* have scheduled meetings. These are not rival groups and a villager may belong to more than one. The writer has attempted for many years to find out what *Kōshin-kō* 庚申講 is about. The characters written for it are for Elder Brother Metal and Monkey. That and the fact that it meets six times a year point to the sexagesimal calendar. She found a book about *Kōshin* faith in Echigo (Niigata), and bought it eagerly. When she read into it, she only learned how responsible persons took their turn to host meetings in various villages and what food and the amount members were assigned to furnish for the meetings.

Jizō-kō are held all over Japan, but rather personal meetings were called to the writer's attention on Sado Island. Two small figures of *Jizō* stood under shrubbery on the estate of a friend. He said that one of them was considered to be especially effective by an old woman in the neighborhood. When she had a problem she could not overcome, she and a friend would come to escort *Jizō* to her home. She would invite a group of friends to join her there. She would serve favorite food to her guests and to *Jizō*, then they would sing and dance and tell folk tales as entertainment. After that the old woman would make her petition to *Jizō*. The old woman would not return him to the garden until her problem was solved.

A few other special observances which are not on the scale of a festival should be noted. *Risshun*, already mentioned, is celebrated mainly in homes. The head of the family tosses parched beans out of the house at night, shouting, "Demons out, good fortune in!" There is a scramble among the children to collect beans, one for each year of their ages. These are chewed up and eaten to protect them from ill health. This ceremony has been taken over by many temples in cities, and celebrities such as judo champions or actors are asked to toss the beans. A crowd of fans is there to try to get beans.

Four double numeral days are observed although the original purposes have forgotten for some of them. The 1st Day of the First Month has already been discussed. The 3rd Day of the Third Month, still known as the Peach Festival, has peach blossoms as decoration for a tier on which dolls are arranged. The peach has long been thought to have magic power, and formerly peach wine was drunk at this time to

rid the body of sickness. In Tottori remnants of the old observance can still be seen. Little girls make paper dolls, a male and female, lay them on a little straw mat decorated with peach blossoms and send them floating down stream, asking them to carry away sickness and evil spirits. But usually little girls have a party where their dolls are displayed and they drink sweet wine.

The 5th Day of the Fifth Month has had even more changes in its observance. Originally it was dedicated to scarecrows which were set up in the fields to ward off insects. These scarecrows gradually were made in the form of famous warriors for boys to imitate. Then came the carp streamers set up on poles by the house to inspire boys to have the courage of carp as they swim upstream. But the official calendar now designates the 5th Day of the Fifth Month as Children's Day, meaning both boys and girls.

The 7th Day of the Seventh Month, formerly known as the Weavers Festival, honored the legend of the two stars, Alstair and her lover Vega, in the Milky Way. Women and girls prayed to become good weavers, but today the legend remains only in a folk tale. Bamboo are set up at doorways or shops and girls write little messages on bright strips of paper and fasten them to the bamboo and pray that they can become good calligraphers.

There seems to be some trace of a 9th Day of the Ninth Month observance, but it no longer has any meaning. However, Moon Viewing on the night of the full moon in the Ninth Month is popular. Perhaps this is a relic of times when the moon as well as the sun was worshipped, but now it is more or less a poetic exercise. For those who can not view the moon rising over hills in the out of doors, a picture of the moon will suffice. A stalk or two of pampas grass in a vase will complete the setting in which poems are written. Taro, chestnuts, and autumn fruits are enjoyed. The full moon is also viewed on the night of the 10th of October. In some places farmers note the weather to forecast their crops in the following year. If the moon is overcast, the crops will be poor, and if it is clear, the crops will be good. There is also a Nijūsanya-kō, a 23rd Night-Kō in October for men to gather to await the moon rise. By the time the waning moon rises low on the horizon, the watchers have had time to imbibe quantities.

This paper has selected only a few of the many days observed in Japan and samples of how they are celebrated, but it reflects the pleasure all Japanese have in them. There are many changes in the way in which festivals are observed, but the constant element remains. That is the relationship of a festival to *kami*. They are sure to come back for the festivals each year.