Obon Festival in Japan

One of Japan's three major festivals is the Obon Festival (also called Bon Festival), which takes place in the late summer/early fall. The festival is Buddhist in origin, and it honors ancestors who have passed on to the afterlife. During Obon, ancestors are released from the underworld, and roam the land of the living for a day. To appease the spirits, the people of Japan prepare altars which hold offerings of food, perform traditional dances in honor of the festival's history, and clean the graves of the ancestors. The festival is a chance for the people of Japan to connect to their cultural heritage and remember those they have lost.

There is much regional variety in the way Obon is celebrated, including when it is held. Historically, the holiday was celebrated on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, which falls in August. However, when countries began adopting the Gregorian calendar, it shifted the dates so that Obon fell in July. For that reason, the festival is celebrated at different times all over Japan and the customs and rituals vary significantly.



On the day of the festival, families prepare foods to place on altars outside their homes. The food is an offering for the spirits to keep them satisfied during the holiday. The welcoming of the spirits is called "Mukaebi" which is done using paper lanterns called "chochin". The families display the paper lanterns outside the home to help welcome the souls into the land of the living.

After the offerings are made, many people will head to the burial sites of their ancestors for "haka mairi", which is translated to "visiting the grave". They will then sweep and wash the gravestones together as a sign of respect for their ancestors. Afterwards, the family might place flowers and food offerings on the grave.



Another significant part of the holiday is the traditional dancing which is called Bon Odori. Bon Odori is a traditional style of folk dance that is passed down through generations. It depicts folk tales and the cultural origins of the holiday. According to the story, a

monk named Maudgalyayana rescued his mother who was suffering in the afterlife. Once she was rescued, he was so elated that he danced in celebration. The Bon Odori dances are said to be a tradition passed down from this story. The specific music and dance steps are dependent on geographic regions and cultural distinctions. There is often a group of people playing live music and singing for Bon Odori. Some regions have specific attire that is worn during the dance.

At the end of the festival, the paper lanterns are placed in bodies of water like rivers, lakes, and the ocean to help guide the spirits back to the underworld. The festival promotes the revival of cultural traditions and religious history, and helps to connect the living to their ancestors who have passed. The Obon Festival demonstrates the importance of death care as a community event and a time for people to acknowledge the necessity of death care.

Citations

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