

First Impressions

Story by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

Color and tinsel glitter down from the heights of large, deep stalls of the Otori Festival in the old Asakusa area of Tokyo. Displayed under the glare of exposed light bulbs are ornamental rakes called *kumade*, which are so festooned with cranes, turtles, pine branches, gold coins and other good luck charms that the rake part of them often can't be seen at all.

Crowds swirl about the stalls, carried along in their own under currents. The area is packed with boisterous citizens out to buy a charm to help them "rake in" a better fortune for next year. Every autumn the scene is repeated, but in years like this when the economy is anemic, sales are usually extra brisk.

Spending ¥3,000 to ¥200,000 (roughly \$25 to \$1,500) and up, store owners, kabuki actors, businessmen, families, sushi shop proprietors and bar hostesses throng the compound of the Shinto shrine. They hope to buy up a bit of good fortune for the coming year.

Jubilant clusters crowd around the food stalls that line the approach to the festival area to enjoy the chill of the evening, warmed by hot sake and grilled squid. A lone westerner is likely to be invited to join a group and share in the rollicking festivities.

In December, the battledore festival follows, and so goes the annual two-month build up to the Japanese New Year. Preparing for the New Year is a community affair. The warm ties between neighbors, the seasonal foods and decorations, the year-end gifts and salutation, make us feel like one big



Kumade—Decorative rake for good fortune

family.

Almost twenty years have passed since I moved to Japan. I arrived here attracted by the culture—the colorful cartoon-like woodblock prints, flamboyant kabuki theatrics and the mysterious tea ceremony. Along with these impressions, I carried with me the notion that Japan was a nation of machinelike people.

The Japanese hide their fun-loving nature. Before strangers they shield

their high spirits with a veneer that may be mistaken for cold stiffness.

Reinforcing this image is their grammatically correct, formal English. They come across as too polite and anxious about making a social blunder.

The Japanese businessman or researcher abroad automatically wants to show respect and kindness to those he meets.

This translates in the Japanese mind to *keigo*, ultra polite speech and, there you go—out comes 19th century, stiff

English with flourishes of subjunctives and time-tattered niceties. Or, if the

traveler is savvy, out may come a jumble of "oh my gods;" "long time no sees" and similar jargon, in the attempt to adapt to the listener.

In Boston, when we occasionally had Japanese to dinner, they always seemed to wiggle out of any meaningful opinion on whatever subject broached. Nothing controversial, cynical or ironic ever passed their lips. I was not surprised at this behavior. Coming from the land of computer chips; solid, state-of-the-art cars; and watches precise to the split-second, I sensed that only robot-types could possibly turn out the many fine Japanese products that I was using. The perfection of their manufacturing was welded onto my image of the Japanese character itself.

Years later, I look back at this impression and I am puzzled. It may be the direct translation of the appropriate, exacting Japanese standards of politeness into English, along with the cameras around the necks, that have misled so many of us

into thinking Japan is a country full of straight-laced people.

Initially, I moved into a new high-rise condominium in Sapporo, a modern city in Northern Japan. My neighbors ignored me. They ignored each other as well and my preconception of the distanced Japanese was reinforced. So isolated was my life in the condominium that it inspired me to search for a neighborhood with a community in which I could take part.

I located a 6-mat *tatami* room with no bath and a communal toilet that I shared with a handful of Hokkaido University students, all ensconced in their own tiny box-like rooms. As astounded as they may have been to have me living in their midst, they and the four-generation, extended family who ran this student's dorm were both curious and friendly.

Two houses down the street, an impeccably kimono-ed elderly woman named Setsuko lived. She had her eye on me from the beginning and took to inviting me in for green tea and sweets most mid-mornings. Years later, she confided to me that she had been worried because I didn't seem to know the proper manners. She set herself whole-heartedly to the task of teaching me the proper ways to do everyday things like sip tea and sit on the *tatami* mats. She was strict and exacting.

As time wore on, she showed me how to put on the winter kimono she had made for me. Setsuko also dressed me in a long sleeved silk one and had a friend take *omiai* (arranged marriage) photos of me. Tentative feelers were even sent out about "arranging" me a partner as she believed it was never too early for a female to marry. She taught me how to greet people and carry on my life in the neighborhood without inadvertently offending anyone. In Japan, form and protocol are important.

Of the many faces of the Japanese, the dedicated worker, the loyal company man, the stickler for details, the souvenir buying tourist and the

dedicated housewife are the most well known. The warm side is often more difficult for people of verbally-focused or extroverted cultures to perceive. Yet, it doesn't take much socializing to make one realize that there is a reason most Japanese carry handkerchiefs with them. Never far from a cry or a laugh, underneath the formalities, the Japanese are a vibrantly emotional, warm-hearted people.

Glimpses of this can be had in watching how Japanese part from each other. There is a "waving-until-out-of-sight" ritual which contrasts strongly with those who run off without so much as a glance backward. Even in subways, it is not uncommon to see friends gazing attentively at a subway car until it is long out of sight.

A Japanese friend told me that this last glance often comes with the sentiment that this may be the last time we may ever be with each other and that it's a moment to be cherished. This thought flits through her mind whenever it's time to say goodbye, even to the friends she sees quite often. It is ritualized in the ceremony of literally "seeing" people off until they can no longer be seen.

Perhaps a heightened sense of the ephemeral comes from life in a country that has been plagued by earthquakes, typhoons, floods and other disasters. Whatever the reason, though, there clearly is a deep feeling of the fleeting nature of life and the fragility of humankind. This sentiment is also reflected in a love for the cherry blossom, a flower which no sooner than it blossoms, flutters down to the ground. The tragedy of death seems never far off.

In the upcoming series of articles, I am going to point out some of the aspects of Japanese culture and communication that I find particularly interesting. Although there is no quick and easy Rosetta Stone to the understanding of a different culture, I hope to pass on to you my views about how different kinds of behavior and actions are interpreted on this side



of the Pacific. These are personal views, resulting from my having been an active member of an all-Japanese community in the traditional *shitamachi* area of Tokyo for the past fifteen years. I hope to underscore some of the blunders that may adversely color a relationship with Japanese friends or business acquaintances.

What began for me as one-year of cultural studies turned into a deep appreciation of the Japanese themselves. Their image and their reality are worlds apart. Japanese may be different from Americans, Europeans or Africans, but they are not at all cold or staid!

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