

When Ghosts Come to Visit

By Patricia Massy

Mr. T, director of an internationally respected company, recently received a letter from a long-lost and almost forgotten flame. "I want to see you again," it said, "even if I have to return as a ghost." Showing me the letter, he seemed to be both secretly pleased and a bit shaken. Ghosts can be benign if they hold no grudge. A different acquaintance of mine told about waking one night to find the ghost of a former girlfriend sitting quietly beside his *futon*. On the other hand, malicious ghosts are the stuff of spooky stories, the ones told to create a nice chill down the spine on a sultry summer evening.

The writer of that letter to Mr.T used the word *o-bake*, which, like the word *yuurei*, denotes an apparition. The invisible spirit, or soul, of the dead is simply called *rei*. After a person dies, the *rei* remains in the immediate vicinity. Envelopes of condolence money, therefore, are addressed to *rei-zen*, or "in front of the spirit." On the 49th day after death the spirit becomes a *hotoke*, a buddha starting its long journey through various buddhahoods. The envelope is then addressed to *butsu-zen*, "in front of the Buddha."

If, however, the soul of the deceased is still attached to the sentient world, it will remain behind, possibly to appear or, should the death have been one of violence or grief, to haunt. The numerous rituals and ceremonies held for the dead aim to set the soul at peace so that it may happily ascend into a blissful afterlife.

There is one time in the year when the return of the spirit is actually welcomed. This is O-Bon. On the 13th night of the 7th month (August in most parts of Japan but observed in July by some, especially in the Tokyo area) the living prepare their homes for

a three-day visit by the spirits of their ancestors. It is a time of great celebration, as the spirits are not *o-bake* but contented *rei*. It is also one of the two great holidays of the year, the other being the New Year. The big cities are strangely empty as people leave to celebrate with their relatives in the country. Others take advantage of this rare chance to get away for a vacation. Bumper to bumper traffic on the expressways out of Tokyo piles up for



An altar that has been cleaned and decorated to welcome the spirits during O-Bon

as much as 50 kilometers and the Shinkansen trains run at 200% capacity. In order to avoid the crush, many opt for a trip abroad. On the other hand, if there had been a death in their family in the past year, they would probably make a point to celebrate O-Bon.

O-Bon is a lovely experience for the customs associated with it are beautiful. In some places the ancestral spirits are met at the family grave and led home by the light of a paper lantern, but most people direct the spirits by building a small fire in front of the entrance to their home. The fire is made of dried hemp stalks which

burst into flame at the touch of a match. A little horse and cow made of straw are provided for the spirits to ride over the flames, through the door and into the Buddhist altar. Sometimes the horse is made of a cucumber with four toothpicks for legs, and the cow of an eggplant. The flames are extinguished by sprinkling with a bundle of small purple flowers dipped in water.

To welcome the spirits, the altar has been cleaned and delightfully decorated. Inside the altar are *ihai*, tablets inscribed with the names of deceased family members. There is also one *ihai* for "Great Ancestors." Usually a stalk of *houzuki*, Chinese lantern plant, is placed somewhere because the bright orange fruit resemble paper lanterns, and often branches of bush clover are either suspended over the altar or set vertically on both sides. Always there is a vase with a lotus bud as well as flowers that bloom in late summer such as gentians, Chinese bell flowers, and chrysanthemums. On a mat of cattail reeds are summer vegetables: an eggplant, a small pumpkin, an ear of corn, green beans, and the like.

Watermelons, peaches, oranges, and other fruit also are set in front of the altar.

Since the spirits would wish to eat a proper meal, besides the usual water and tea to quench their thirst, delicious vegetarian delicacies are readied for their coming. These are placed in small dishes specifically for this purpose.

In the first year of mourning, a paper lantern, the one that would have lit the way to the home, is hung over the altar. Relatives and friends send standing lanterns that have pastel scenes of flowers painted on their paper globes, and these are placed on the floor on each side of the altar arrangement. The softly glowing lanterns, the flowers, the

Photo : Patricia Massy

incense and the decorated altar create an atmosphere of exquisite peacefulness as if a bit of heaven had slipped down to earth.

For the next two days different meals are prepared each day, and the more people who partake of them, the greater will be the happiness of the deceased. At a nearby shrine there will be circle dancing every night, again to please the spirits. Although in urban areas the tunes are blasted out from tape recorders, in many rural areas the melodies are still played on *shamisen*, flute and drum and the types of dances are so numerous that none is repeated in a single night.

When the time comes for the spirits to return to their celestial abode, again a fire is lit in front of the house, as late in the evening as possible in order to delay the parting. The horse and the cow jump over the fire and face away from the house. The fire is extinguished. The fruit, vegetables, cakes, and flowers are then bundled up in the reed mat and with the horse and cow are disposed of. In former days the whole lot was thrown into a river or placed under a bridge where the homeless could make a meal of it. In some areas lanterns are set out on the sea to lead the spirits away. Lafcadio Hearn wrote of being so enchanted with the beauty of the lights drifting away on the tide in Matsue that he plunged into the water and swam with them out into the sea. The fantastic fires set out in the shape of the character 大 or 妙 on the mountains of Kyoto are also a type of farewell fire.

Naturally all the preparations and festivities associated with Bon require an enormous amount of effort, especially on the part of the wife who must be making and serving all the food. Are all those niggling rituals necessary in this day and age? Yes, for the bereaved. Keeping occupied staves the tears. When sorrow would brake all action, rituals provide the means to express their grief and to carry on through the otherwise empty days.

As in many cultures, a wake takes place on the night(s) before the funeral. Even after all the guests have left, the

dead must not be left without a wakeful person nearby to keep company. Then for several more days after cremation, the candles and incense must be kept burning constantly in front of the urn. Exhausted from successive sleepless nights, the ceremonies, and the entertaining of guests, the bereaved have no opportunity to dissolve into the paralysis of loneliness. When they finally are alone, they fall asleep.

When they awake, endless duties await them. The priest and close relatives will come again on the 7th day, and in conservative families every 7th day although this is rare nowadays until the 49th when the urn is placed in the family grave. Then there will be a large gathering again of friends and relatives. Sharing in the banquet served on such occasions is thought of as a way to console the deceased. Notes of gratitude accompanied by a gift then must be sent out to all who attended or gave *o-kouden*, "incense money."

The next two anniversaries will be observed again with family and friends visiting the grave, a priest chanting the sutras, and a banquet afterwards. By that time the loss of the loved one no longer feels so painful. It almost seems that the spirit, *rei*, is receding further and further away from this world. And indeed, the anniversaries are noted at greater and greater intervals: the 7th year, the 13th, the 33rd, the 50th. (Because the year of the death is counted as the first in the same way that a baby arrives one year old at birth, all actually fall one year earlier.) Finally somewhere between the 33rd and 100th anniversaries, depending on the sect, the soul will have found eternal rest and reached the domain of the collective ancestors.

Because wakes and funerals require the attendance not only of the



Bon-Odori festival; people dancing in a circle to please the spirits

immediate family but also far-flung relatives as well as friends and colleagues, and memorial services are almost as obligatory, a surprising amount of time and money of an adult's life are spent on consoling the dead. A solid black outfit (to be worn with a single strand of pearls but no other adornment) can be found in every woman's wardrobe, and flocks of people garbed in black are a common sight. When a delightful weekend must be cancelled to attend a memorial, one can't help wondering if all those ceremonies are really necessary. From the perspective of society as a whole, yes. Often those are the only times that the family will get together. A feeling of belonging, of a place in this world - and the next - is nurtured. From the side of the bereaved, it is indeed a consolation that people remember their beloved, for the dead are not truly dead until they are forgotten. And for Mr. T, the proper rites will assure that he need not worry about being visited on dark, lonely nights. **JTI**

Patricia Massy has a degree in Fine Arts from the University of North Carolina. She teaches at Kanto Gakuin University and writes and lectures on traditional crafts.