

Strange But True: Discovering Japanese Mysteries

By Catrien Ross

It is dusk by the time I reach Osore-zan, translated into English as Mount Dread. In the deepening gloom the eerie landscape is even more foreboding. Bubbling sulfur hot springs, some colored yellow, some blood red, release the stink of rotten eggs into the autumn air. Here and there wisps of steam rise from cracks in stone that can be icy cold or hot to the touch. A short walk away, at the crater's center, a stretch of water known as Lake Usori gleams dark and still. Perhaps it is mere fancy, but standing on the shore, aptly named the shore of paradise, I feel that were I to set sail for the other side, there would be no return. In these murky waters only one species of fish, a type of dace, can survive the acidic content. All around, the grey desolation, broken only by a few hardy rhododendron bushes, comes across as the stage prop for an imagined scene from hell.

Osore-zan's moonscape of jagged rocks and no trees is actually a caldera located near the tip of the axe-shaped Shimokita Peninsula in Aomori Prefecture, part of Japan's northern Tohoku region. Long considered sacred, it is supposedly a spot where the living can meet the dead. In local idiom, those who have died have "gone to the mountain," and it is here at this crater that contact can once again be made with family members who have long since left the human world. From all over Japan people anxious to communicate with spirits of the dead head here to consult with the area's shamanistic mediums—traditionally blind, old women known as *itako*—who offer their services at a special festival now held twice a year. When she is given specific information, such as a name, the *itako* begins keening in a sing-song voice to initiate the trance that will transport her to limbo, where she will search for the designated soul and possibly bring back a message. Sometimes her voice abruptly changes, or her pattern of moving shifts, indicating that spirit contact has been

made and a message is coming through. Unfortunately, any communications from the spirit world are relayed in a thick, northern dialect that even natives of this area have difficulty understanding. Nevertheless, many people leave Osore-zan satisfied that they have indeed reached the spirit of, say, a dead spouse or child.

Once the hectic July and October festivals are over, the *itako* return to their village homes, where they continue to be quietly consulted throughout the year on a variety of problems. When someone falls ill, for example, the *itako*, as shaman, can attempt to identify which spirit is causing the sickness. If she succeeds she rids the body of its intruder, thus curing the patient of the disease. Another commonly requested task is calling down personal household gods for the area's families.

A girl novice usually enters *itako* training before her first menstruation. She then spends several years learning chants, prayers, and a form of fortune-telling. Once she completes the ritual known as "possession by a god," she is believed to have entered into a holy marriage and is thereafter qualified to become an independent practitioner. At the major July festival especially, many *itako* gather around Osore-zan's main gate to perform for visitors as mediums speaking in the voice of the dead.

Besides showcasing ancient folk beliefs, this sacred mountain is home to the more recent Entsu-ji temple, established in 845 and now run by the Buddhist Soto sect, a major Zen discipline founded by Dogen (1200-1253) after his return to Japan from China in 1227. Buddhist influence also shows in

the numerous statues of Jizo, the guardian deity of both children and the spirits of the dead of any age. His job as such is to make nightly rounds of the rocky riverbed which many Japanese believe lies between this world and the next. Here Jizo encourages the yet homeless spirits who are busy piling up small mounds of stones to enter paradise. At the same time he frightens away the malevolent demons who delight in constantly knocking down the stone piles the spirits have so painstakingly built. Most visitors, therefore, feel compelled to add to the numerous rock piles which line the walking paths. As darkness rapidly descends, I, too, place a few stones to lend a human hand to Osore-zan's struggling spirit world.

But while shamanistic traditions may seem right at home in rural Tohoku, Aomori tells another story, which, if it were ever proved true, would turn the Christian world on its ear. According to local legend Jesus Christ was not crucified at Calvary. No, instead he died right here in Japan, and his grave can be found in the tiny village of Shingo.

Two wooden crosses mark the spot. Facing one another at the top of a shady hill reached by a short series of steps,



An *itako* (medium) calls the spirits of the dead.

each cross is surrounded by a white, picket fence. At the foot of the small hill (actually two slight mounds), are white boards separately inscribed in Japanese and English, explaining that this remote site is the grave of Christ.

What happened is that Christ first came to Japan at the age of twenty-one to study theology. At the age of thirty-one he returned to Judea to preach God's message, but the people, instead of listening, tried to kill him. It was Christ's younger brother, Iskiri, however, who was crucified and died on the cross in his place. Christ managed to escape and after a long and troublesome voyage he returned to Japan and this village, where he lived until he died at the age of one hundred and six. The grave of Christ is marked by the cross on the right. The cross on the left is the grave of his brother, or rather, of Iskiri's ears, which Christ brought with him, along with a lock of Mary's hair. These facts, says the board, are based on Christ's own testament. Near the crosses stand the carved stone tombs of Christ's Japanese descendants, who go by the name Sawaguchi, and whose family crest is taken from the Star of David.

A large Star of David also tops the tall, white roadway sign that points the way to this unlikely discovery. The grave was not identified as Christ's until the summer of 1935, when a certain Mr. Takeuchi came here to confirm what was written in an old historical record found in his family house in Ibaraki Prefecture, near Tokyo. The diary stated that Christ indeed lived in this community, which was formerly called Herai (or Hebrew) village, a name that locals say came about because of Christ's long stay here. They point to a village culture which is a curious hodge podge of beliefs and customs with Judeo-Christian links.

A special village song, Nanyado, has words that make no sense at all in Japanese, but they have been recognized as Hebrew. The Shinto ceremony for newborns involves blessing the baby with a sign of the cross, and when a child takes its first walk outdoors, the parents draw a cross on the infant's forehead for protection. People here say



Osore-zan, Shimokita Peninsula (Aomori Prefecture)

aya and *dada* for father, and *apa* and *gaga* for mother—not Japanese expressions. Obviously someone did come to Shingo long ago, and scholars speculate that it may have been a Christian escaping persecution. During Japan's Edo era (1603-1868) Tohoku became a refuge for "secret Christians" who dared not openly state their faith. Villagers have handed down the story that Christ was balding, with white hair, a long nose, a red face, and that he habitually wore a crumpled overcoat. He was called Tengu, or mountain goblin. Meantime, Japan's various Christian associations have no comment about the Shingo claim, while Sawaguchi Toyoji, who owns the land, vows that he will never allow the site to be excavated, lest people lose a precious dream.

More ancient links

My next stop in Aomori is Mount Towari, to see the pyramid stumbled upon by a Japanese artist in 1935, the same year the alleged grave of Christ was announced. Also mentioned in the Takeuchi family history, this pyramid in what is now the Mayogotai Recreational Forest, is one of seven Japanese pyramids, all of which are said to be older than the pyramids of Egypt. Compared with those Egyptian marvels, however, this overgrown mound is decidedly unimpressive.

Examination of the pyramid, which is reached through a red Shinto *torii*, or gate, has determined that the rocks are set facing in the four compass directions. One very large rock, now lying on its face and half-buried, is known as the mirror stone, and it is thought that it once stood upright, and that it has symbols carved into it. In the so-called Ansei Earthquake in 1857, this rock toppled over. Because the summit of the pyramid is aligned with the pole star, the entire structure may have been some sort of astronomical calendar. The existence of a small shrine indicates that the pyramid may also have been a sacred place for religious rituals, and one British investigator theorizes that it could have been a location for sun worship.

An even more beguiling mystery is whether Aomori may have been visited by aliens in the distant past. Some people think this may indeed have happened, especially when they look at the clay dolls known as *shakkoki-dogu*. Their bulky, ornate costumes, with elaborate headgear, have been described as space suits from antiquity. The most intriguing feature, however, is the oversized goggles, similar to those worn by skiers today. In fact, *dogu* means doll and *shakkoki* means goggles.

Theories about these clay figures, several of which have been discovered, abound. Researchers say they were used

for funerals, since most were found smashed and buried—the queer face could have been a death mask. Others remain convinced that they portray visitors from outer space, especially since the dolls belong to Japan's Jomon era (8,000 to 200 B.C.), a neolithic culture based on hunting, gathering, and fishing, with pit dwellings for homes (the foundations of Jomon pit houses, partially-underground dwellings that were once covered with straw roofs supported by poles, can still be seen at Oyu and other sites throughout Tohoku). Evidence for the existence of Jomon people has been garnered largely from the refuse heaps, or shell mounds, scattered around their settlements. Throughout Aomori, as well as in neighboring Akita and Iwate prefectures, the relics found at archaeological sites known as the Kamegaoka (hill of pots) culture sphere, testify to this dynamically creative period in Japan's stone age. Most characteristic of the era is the intricate *jomon* (cord-patterned) earthenware, of complex design and exquisite craftsmanship.

Today this distinctive artistry from Tohoku's past continues to inspire Ichinohe Hiro-omi, a well-known local potter who guides me to a small field near the village of Kizukuri. Here a farmer was plowing as usual when he turned up a 34.5 cm-tall goggle-eyed clay doll which is now showcased in the National Museum at Ueno in Tokyo, where it still retains its ancient secrets. The farmer's modest field, on the other hand, has become yet another Aomori tourist attraction, albeit disfigured by a towering white plaster replica of the fantastic figurine.

The Jomon era is again the focus of another puzzler at Oyu, a quiet resort between Aomori and Akita. In the foothills southeast of the town stands the Oyu Stone Circle, which is thought to date back some 4,000 years. Considered the best example of approximately thirty similar stone circles located throughout Tohoku and also in Hokkaido, the Oyu Stone Circle is actually two large circles. Between the inner and outer circles is placed a sun dial, with rocks laid out like spokes radiating from its center. The

stones were most likely dragged from an area about twelve kilometers away, a considerable distance at the time. The Oyu Stone Circle was discovered by chance in 1931 by government surveyors, and the site has since been designated a historical relic. As with the shakkoki-dogu, there are numerous theories to explain the circle's existence. During World War II the site was used, for example, to fuel military propaganda touting Japan's cultural superiority. Another theory postulated that this is where world culture began.

Dug about 70 cm deep beneath the stones are 1.5 meter in diameter oval hollows, which may have been used as graves, or for special worship. Researchers also believe corpses may have been buried with arms and legs folded into the body with the head facing west. As a graveyard, the circle could have started out small and gradually been increased in size to accommodate burials during the Jomon era. Experts so far cannot agree as to whether the bones that have been found represent Japanese, or Ainu, or some other, even older people. Others argue that the Oyu Stone Circle has nothing to do with graves, but is instead a primitive calendar that has astronomical significance only.

Stories in stone pose a different enigma which beckons in Hokkaido. At the coastal town of Otaru is the so-called Temiya Cave. Discovered in 1866 by a stone-mason named Chobei, the cave contains detailed wall carvings which first became famous when Enomoto Takeaki, a Japanese politician, stopped over in Otaru in 1878 after a stint of duty in Siberia. Visiting Temiya cave, he sketched the carvings and brought a tracing back to Tokyo. A British teacher at what later became part of Tokyo Imperial University (now the University of Tokyo), traveled to Otaru the following summer and publicized information about the cave in the newsletter of the Tokyo British Society. Soon numerous scholars took up the trail, with one report in 1914 concluding that the symbols were of Turkish origin, probably carved before Japan's Nara period (674-794), and that the cave was a tomb. In

1918 one scholar published a paper stating that the carvings were ancient Turkish meaning, "I crossed the sea at the head of my followers and fought and arrived at this cave." He also believed the cave to be a tomb, and that the cave writer had engaged in battle with Japan's Abeno Hirafo in 660. Then in 1947, a local historian, Asaeda Fumihiro, an Otaru elementary school principal, declared that the carvings were actually Chinese characters from around 1,000 B.C. meaning, "People came with many ships and built a shrine here. Our king died and was buried here. There was a battle with a religious service and sacrifice." Critics dismissed all this, saying that the carvings were made sometime during the end of the Taisho era (1912-1926) to the early Showa era (1926-1988). The most vocal critic was the president of Sapporo Hokushin Hospital, who claimed that the head priest at Temiya shrine, a certain Shirano Kaun, had confessed that one of his disciples had admitted carving the figures for fun. This seemed to close the controversy until in 1950 a student at Sapporo South High School found another cave with similar symbols in neighboring Yoichi City. The next year the vice president of Hokkaido University investigated Yoichi and discovered more than 200 such carvings in a cave now called Fugoppe, an Ainu word. Today the carvings at both Temiya and Fugoppe are considered genuine, perhaps relating to religious rituals of the multifaceted Jomon period.

As for me, my shakkoki-dogu reproduction, a gift created by the potter Ichinohe, reminds me just how many such unsolved mysteries the world yet holds, and how much there still remains for each of us to discover. ■

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