

MATSUYAMA OUTLOUD, November 2024

—Voices of the WGO? Staff and Members of the Volunteer Guide Seminar—

After Halloween, Before Christmas

Public opinion polls show the number of Japanese who believe in "kami" or the existence of forces beyond human knowledge is decreasing.

Even so, quite a few Japanese people choose shrines, the traditional home of kami, as travel destinations.

We pray at turning points in our lives and at New Year's visits to local shrines.

Shrines are considered power spots capable of granting our wishes, such as family safety, recovery from illness, academic success, prosperous business, traffic safety, easy child delivery and more.

In recent years, I've had chances to visit some very famous shrines.

It is said that all Japanese people should visit Ise Jingu shrine once in a lifetime. We are supposed to pray for the peace and security of the country at this shrine, where the guardian deity of Japan resides. I didn't know this when my mother accompanied me there last November, and so I made a more usual prayer for my family's health.

A UNESCO World Heritage site, Itsukushima Shrine in Hiroshima is known for its scenic views, and this sacred spot had many visitors from abroad when I went there last year.

An English guide explained to a big tourist group from Tuscany that, "Japanese shrines are like companies." I doubted this Westerner's opinion at first, but it might not be too far from the truth. Shrines can advertise in the media, set high fees for prayers, receive offerings and sell amulets and souvenirs.

This March, when I went to Izumo Ōyashiro (generally called Izumo-taisha), one of the most ancient Shinto shrines in Japan, I scooped a bag of sand from Inasanohama beach before visiting the shrine. By offering sand at the shrine, I could bring back the sand purified by the shrine in its place.

Back home, I divided the sacred sand into small bags and distributed them to my friends and relatives. Everyone was pleased. They put it on their Shinto altars or at the four corners of their houses to receive divine favor.

Fulfillment in love, happiness of a married couple and the prosperity of their descendants are important benefits that Shinto provides us.

You may have a new impression of Shintoism if you ever make a visit to Taga Shrine in Uwajima City, Ehime.

First off, I was overwhelmed by the huge phallic sculptures in the shrine's garden. The priest explained to me that his father had risked his life to collect materials dealing with human sexuality from all over the world, and there appeared to be innumerable exhibits in the showcases, on the walls and even plastered to the ceiling of all three floors of the shrine's museum.

Some looked like cultural assets, like the Edo- era ukiyoe prints depicting physical love, but others were simply x-rated junk, and I keenly felt the gap between the ethnographic displays and what was basically pornography.

There are various shrines in Japan, but to make your wishes come true, you should not only pray,

but act on your prayers.

Visiting a shrine can be the trigger which will lead you to actively acknowledge your wishes, and then take steps to make those wishes come true.

(Miwa N.)

At the end of November, after Thanksgiving, I feel in holiday mode. By the time Advent, the 4 Sundays preceding Christmas, arrives, it is time to get out our holiday decorations.

Now, I can't count the number of times I've seen fully decorated Christmas trees at department stores, shopping malls and everywhere else right after Halloween. Who hurries to set up ornaments that early in November?

Speaking of Christmas trees, several years ago, my husband and I argued about whether or not we should give away one of our spare trees. Since we had a couple of artificial trees in our storage, one of which we brought back from Minnesota, I thought we could donate one of them to his department at medical school.

Isao was upset at my proposal. He argued Christmas decorations were fine for the patients at the University Hospital but not for his colleagues and students in the research buildings.

He'd never seen a Christmas tree on campus before.

This only made me more determined to donate our tree to the university.

The next evening, I carted the 170cm tree off to his office. Together with a female postdoctoral researcher, I decorated the tree with our old ornaments while singing along to Christmas carols.

All without telling Isao!

A few days later, female staff moved the decorated tree out of the office and onto the landing.

To Isao's surprise, the tree became a popular holiday photo spot, especially among nursing and med students.

Isao was impressed with that unexpected news.

What's more, at the end of last December, a secretary working at the lab next door presented him with a Baumkuchen cake. This holiday treat was a thank you for our setting up a Christmas tree for them to enjoy.

I'd be more than happy if with our old tree we shared some Christmas spirit with the many international students studying hard in her lab.

Are you going to decorate a Christmas tree to celebrate the season? Or, have you done it already?

(Kay)