

Kijimun's Monologue —No.9—

Topic: The night of New Year's Eve

Keywords: *Ōmisoka, Tushinu yuru, Toshigami*

Haisai and Haitai!

Here, it's December and the end of this year is just coming around the corner. In this article I would like to talk about *Ōmisoka* (New Year's Eve). *Ōmisoka* is a Japanese traditional celebration on the last day of the year. It's a day that makes everyone busy with important activities such as house cleaning, putting up New Year's decorations, visiting relatives, and so forth. Those traditional activities for concluding the year were completed on *Ōmisoka* in order to start the new year fresh.

On such a busy day, people spend their *Ōmisoka* with the traditional foods and rituals which vary depending on the region they come from. In Okinawa, we spend a traditional *Ōmisoka* called "*Tushinu Yuru*" that is under the lunar calendar, relishing varieties of traditional foods with families. Domestic swine slaughtered by the owners are served as *sōki jiru*(pork sparerib soup) or *tebichi* (pork legs). Such traditional cuisine including pork meals, *daikon namasu* (raw radish seasoned in vinegar) and others are placed on the altar as an offering. It is believed that some regions had their own unique traditions in which people offered a handful of rice put on several spots in the house or *Ubuku* (a bowl of cooked rice offered to the deities and the ancestral spirits) placed on agricultural tools such as sickles, hoes or spatulas, to let mice have their New Year's Eve. Also, falling asleep on the New Year's Eve was thought as a bad omen so people in some regions believed that they had to stay up all night to see the new year in.

"Visitors" in Each Region

Many people in Japan believe in an ancient tradition of "*Toshigami*". *Toshigami* are thought to be deities of good harvest visiting each house during the New Year's season to bring wealth and blessings to people. Therefore, their roles to play in the New Year's Eve and New Year's Day are considered to be very important. *Toshigami* are also thought to be the spirits of ancestors. The "visitors" in the night of the New Year's Eve can be seen throughout Japan in a disguised form. The most famous story might be "*Kasako-jizō*". *Kasako-jizō* is a story of an old couple that saw a *jizō* (a guardian deity who protects the souls of children from falling into hell) on the street which was covered in snow. The couple was poor but because they felt sorry for the *jizo* they gave their umbrella and washcloth to the *jizō*. On that night, the old couple heard a noise when they were sleeping at home. They went outside then saw piles of coins and various foods. It was a gift from the *jizō*. Thanks to the *jizō*, the couple had a happy new year.

There are stories that have been carried on in Tokunoshima Island, Kagoshima Prefecture about the visitors in the New Year's Eve, "*Kinkai ni natta Dhatoo*"(Dhatoo who became a golden nugget) is a story that a blind person visited a family and spent a wonderful night at their house. Another story is "*Monoiu Kame*"(The talking turtle). A talking turtle was a turtle which understood human language. It suddenly appeared on the beach and dispensed good fortune to people.

There are customs that fearsome deities walk around neighborhoods to warn people not to do

wrong things. A good example is the well-known traditional Japanese folklore of Akita Prefecture, “*Namahage*”(a demonlike being, portrayed by men wearing hefty ogre masks and traditional straw capes during a New Year's ritual) but also in Kagoshima Prefecture, a deity called “*Toshidon*”(a demonlike deity, wearing straw raincoats decorated with the leaves of indigenous plants and monstrous masks) which is similar to *Namahage*.

When looking back on the traditions and customs of your own culture, or the culture around you, wouldn't you like to learn more about it? So why don't you use our databases BIDOM or OPAC at University of the Ryukyus Library, for searching on different cultural characteristics of each region of Japan.