



Japan: O-Bon Festival

Pre-visit Activity: Background Reading

Japan is an island country that is made up of more than 3,000 islands stretching for 3,000 kilometers (1,864 miles) from north to south. Japan is sometimes said to be the shape of a seahorse. The four main islands are Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu. The total area of the country is about the same as the state of California in the U.S.

Japan is located in the part of the world called the “Ring of Fire,” so there are many hot springs, earthquakes, and volcanoes. Because of this, 80% of the land is covered by mountains. Mt. Fuji is Japan’s tallest mountain. It is 3,776 meters (12,388 feet) tall. The geography of a place affects the culture or the way of life of the people who live in that place. Celebrations are an important part of culture.

O-Bon is a centuries-old Buddhist memorial celebration. Because it is a time to pay respects to one’s ancestors, Obon is an important time for family gatherings. O-Bon is celebrated during the 7th month of the lunar calendar which coincides with August.

O-Bon is both serious and festive. Families travel back to their hometowns for a 3-day reunion with their living relatives as well as the spirits of the deceased. To start the celebration a mukae-bi (welcoming fire) is lit at the entrance to the home. It is meant to light the way for the ancestors’ spirits to return to the world of the living. People also visit and clean their ancestors’ gravesites to welcome the spirits back. They offer fruits, vegetables, rice, and flowers at a family altar. Sometimes the local Buddhist priest visits. Then three days later, an okuri-bi (sending-off fire) is lit to guide the ancestors back to the world of the spirits. In some regions of Japan people send off their ancestor’s spirits using a lantern which is floated down a river to the ocean.

The more festive side of the celebration occurs during the evening. Families go to the village center or local Buddhist temple, where something like a big carnival takes place. There is music and dancing. Vendors sell food, toys, and souvenirs. Family members usually wear a yukata, which is a lightweight cotton kimono. During these O-Bon evenings a special community dance, called Bon-Odori, is performed at the festival. Everyone participates – from grandparents to little kids. They all form a circle around a raised yagura stage decorated with lanterns. It is set up for musicians who play Japanese taiko drums, gongs, and flutes. Everyone sings and claps their hands to the steps of the dance as they go round and round the yagura. It is great fun!:

Source: <http://www.globalroadwarrior.com/#mode=country®ionId=75&uri=country-content&nid=20.38&key=facts-holidays>



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Pre-visit Activity: Background Reading Questions **KEY**

1. What is the purpose of the O-Bon celebration?

The purpose of O-Bon is to welcome and pay respects to one's deceased ancestors as they return home during this season.

2. How are mukae-bi and okuri-bi alike and how are they different?

The two are alike in that they both require a fire or light of some kind. They are different because one is to welcome the deceased ancestor to the home and the other is to light the way back to the spirit world.

3. What are two things family members do to honor their ancestors?

Families clean the gravesite. They also place fruits, vegetables, rice and flowers on a family altar.

4. In what two ways are lanterns used during O-Bon?

Lanterns are used to decorate the yagura or stage during the evening community dance called Bon-Odori. They are also used in some regions of Japan to guide the ancestors spirit back home by placing them in a river leading to the ocean.

5. Families gather during the evening around a raised stage or **yagura** to dance a folk dance called **Bon-Odori**.

6. A traditional lightweight cotton kimono called a **yakata** is worn during the festivities.



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5. Families gather during the evening around a raised stage or _____ to dance a folk dance called _____.

6. A traditional lightweight cotton kimono called a _____ is worn during the festivities.