

**Essay
by
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“Defining Tenjin”

In the breeze of a hot summer afternoon, as my host mother and I walked through the narrow alleys searching for a taxi to take us to the bashi, my mind was filled with questions, questions about this giant event I am about to witness. The event is called the Tenjin Omatsuri, or through translations, the Festival of the Heavens. This is one of the three biggest events in Japan. Through out the week my ears were flooded with this very name, and I had been dying to see it. At the day of its opening, we raced against time looking for a taxi to take us to this wondrous place where the city has prepared special seats for us to witness the honorary event for the guardian god of Osaka, Omukae Ningyo and the scholar god, Sugawara.

On and on we went, as the hot summer heat squeeze sweat out of my skin, and on my left hand gripped a bottle of deep Green tea, freshly bought from a convient store for a price of 200 yen, and my right hand tightly clasped my strong surviving camera which had fallen three times on hard cement over the trip. As the clock ticks away, and no taxi can be seen, my host mother began to worry. The climate begin to cool, as the sun is starting its descent, but with no taxi in site and with the festival starting in five minutes, my sweat was not soaked by the cooling weather.

It is at this moment that we have reached the bustling district where we can find a taxi after a long march in a maze of small routes. It is here we found a purple colored car, with its wind shield shining bright and gold like the wings of a guardian angel. I carefully swing the camera to the other side as I opened the taxi door, and with a sense of relieve I gulped down the Japanese tea, leaving only a millimeter subdued in the bottom of the bottle. Through our long walk and search for such a vehicle, we were all tired out, and it took my host mother quite a while before she blurted out the words "Yodobashi". A mere reply of "Hai" and on we went, as the sun light dimmed at the setting day.

The people in Japan are in love with festivals. Everything in the society is festivity related. There is a game of trying to catch a gold fish with tissue paper thin material, there's the giant floats hoisted on to the shoulders of young men as they suffered beneath the weight, there's the beautiful girls in Yukatas, and then there's the brilliant, furious taiko drumming that can be heard from a mile away. In the festivals of Japan, everyone is a member. There is no such thing as just a performer, for every citizen preparing for the witness of the event will wear Japanese style summer gowns or Yukatas, to become full participants of the festivities. I too tried it on once and almost tripped and fell down the stairs.

The festivities of japan ran in different styles, different seasons, and for different reasons. There are the festivals to celebrate the harvest of spring. There are the festivities to bring great fortune and booming business. There's also the "waso" to hold remembrance for the ancient trade with China and Korea. The most powerful theme of all festivities though is the concept of honoring the deities. The whole culture is infatuated with the ideology of celebrating and honoring the gods or kami. Such is the reason for the Tenjin Omatsuri which was started during the Edo period, in the age of the Tokugawa shoguns.

The festival survived through three eras; the Edo, in which it is first introduced to honor a sacred halberd; the Meiji, in which the festival was hampered during the World War II when Osaka was left in ruins after a reign of heavy bombing; the third era became its most glorious when the festival not only became a culturally important festivity, but also an economic glory as companies and industries parade in a wear of tradition. The Tenjin Omatsuri I see before me today is one

that ran in boats with engines and neon lights, but with people on board that wore 17th century dresses and taiko drum beats that survived for more than hundreds of years.

Osaka known for its advance waterways and complex culture due to its early exposure to the trade and commerce of Korea and China, has become the central economical city for Japan. Under the blaring lights of its festivities, the city is like a awoken Asian Venice, with towering buildings built next to rivers and streams, and with bridges that stood out in hundreds as they intersected the rivers. Never in my life have I seen so many bridges that criss crossed around the river landscape, and the entire area has a feeling of a technological plain as if it was out of an episode of Star Trek with the blaring neon signs, and the gigantic screens in the middle of the block.

Then there was the Okawa river, far and wide and right below the brilliant rays of the powerful sun, and a blanket of trees settled by its side, as thousands of people raced to watch the day's honorary event, and far away we hear already the bells presiding for the call of the god, as the sun slowly beams away the day. It is here nearby the Okawa that our seats were presented to us, a long line of neatly presided folding chairs for the tourists and exchange students of the day, and then there was a lot of talking and noisy whispering as people exchange their thoughts about Japan, and it is here that I sat and gained my first view of the first water boat that pierced through the river within a reign of bells.

As we the foreigners, the true audience stare vividly into the horizon of the river, we are brought along to the thought of its history. Everything from our side to the other river side and to the bridge has a long seduced history of its own. Unlike our parades and our fairs, the festivities of Japan are pumped with tradition and ancient background. It's something that is spoken in a range of hundreds of years, and just like this very festival itself, is one with an ancient and ambient past. As the fleets of boats row their way to the Temmangu shrine, we the foreigners are being reminded of Japan's strong historical past, and it's deep respect and honor for its gods.

The success of the people holds a sort of religious debt as I have witnessed during my days of stay as an exchange student. There are the small shrines in households to remind the members of their ancestry, there are the temples that held the major festivities, and then there is the "itarakimus" before we eat. Every single moment we are reminded of a nation that owe it all to the gods. The success of the nation was not only its ability to generate a strong and willing economy but also because of its strong culture who value the respect for their gods, for their land, and their ancestors. It is a nation that can still touch its roots, and it is a people who amass all their western influences still carry the shinning, bristling shrine like floats. It was here that when the sacred halberd was purified by the priest, that from that day on the hardships, the long fought battles of history below a castle ridden in reigns of blood, and the many times that the city was destroyed and constructed again and again, that we will be reminded by this festival of that glorifying past, with its shadows, with its demons, but also with its holiness as it is purified and forgiven within these bonfires and these lights.

In this reign of bells, of drums, of latterns, and a mighty bonfire that burned like the very heat of my heart as it's tense with the excitement of the fireworks and the roars and the claps of the people. It is here that I sense the sense of unity, the tears of immunity, and the long awoken god. In the fire and the lights and above all, the sky, the sun ran bright to remind me 5000 miles away there are the people who pass their days away trying to understand and maneuver their way around the mighty world, and whatever their faces and their smiles have brought, it is that sound of the bells that I sense that have purified their souls through remembrance, and even a weapon as sharp and malevolent as the halberd is sacred under the guidance of its Heavens. At the end of the night, a mighty reign of fireworks ended the festival, and I have passed through a night of thoughts.

The night before, my host father has taught me, the American boy, to play "Kojho no Tsuki" on the piano as I showed him my version of the American anthem, and at that moment when I saw the moon hanging high like a spirit wandering in the never ending skys as it stood shining bright next to the Okawa river, my heart flooded with understanding. I turned to my host mother, at her aged face and her welcoming smile, and it was there I said a word of thank you, "Ahigato Gozaimus."

At the end, we left by the train. There was no need for a Taxi. There was no need for a camera nor was there any need for green tea.