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Remnants of Tradition Behind the Skyscrapers

The warm summer breeze and dancing branches of yellow-green leaves. The rustling of paper shimenawa strung from street to street. Soft humming of bicycle chains and a symphony of cicadas, hidden from eyesight.

As I walked down the familiar uneven stone path, through *Ouji Jin'ja* (shrine) and into the maze of narrow, rural streets, I could not help but stop and close my eyes, breathing in the fresh, calming air of Osaka. Two weeks ago, I had come here, unknowing of the surroundings, bewildered at the customs and speech. Two weeks ago, I stood at this exact spot, turning my head left and right with wild eyes, having lost my way home four blocks away from my host family's house. I laughed. Although it was only two weeks ago, the past and the present seemed ages apart -- now, the route from *Ten'noji* Station to the Tachibana household seemed second nature to me. The once-obnoxious buzzing of cicadas and metallic chime of the shrine bell had been incorporated, in my mind, as an aspect of the unique peace that existed in Osaka.

Concealed by the tall skyscrapers and subway lines in the city, it was often easy to overlook the traditional motifs that shaped the Osakan society. However, while it may go unnoticed in many eyes, old-style Japanese culture plays a significant role in balancing the values prevalent in Osaka today. From infrastructure to everyday behavior, tradition influenced the city of Osaka in numerous ways, with customs that continued to be strictly upheld and practices that have merged in with Western ideas to create a modern culture seen only in Japan.

Prior to departing to a nation I had only seen on television, I had assumed that Osaka, as one of the economic and technological centers of Japan, would present to me a thrillingly, fast-paced lifestyle of pushing my way through the rush hours in the subway. I envisioned Osaka to be a silver, high-tech utopia filled with *Yodobashi Camera* stores and gleaming *Shinkansens*, but barren of trees

and wildlife. And with my misconceived fantasies about the city, I had troubled over the fear that my research topic of tradition would be a difficult feat in the Osakan civilization that had stepped away from their old beliefs and surged towards modern innovation. However, although the downtown districts were just as I imagined, the residential areas gave out an entirely different, rural atmosphere, prioritizing nature and tradition over technology.

As my host family's house was located in the Ten'noji Area, the longest-established of Osakan districts, I observed many traces of tradition lingering in everyday life. Unexpectedly, I also found many signs of nature and plant preservation in the area, showing that the old Shinto appreciation of wildlife had not disappeared from Osaka. Elegant Shinto temples were built to govern each neighborhood, with people both young and old coming to ring the shrine bell on special occasions. Many smaller Shinto alters, the size of a post box, were also spread across the area, some honoring ancestors and others granting success to businesses. Handmade *shimenawa* were strewn from lamp post to lamp post near times of festivities, all crafted by one temple in the area. Despite their lack of front lawns, numerous pots of colorful flowers hung over the entrance to residences. Many houses had a wooden infrastructure, with sliding doors and tatami mats unique to Japanese culture. While in San Francisco, traffic was dominated by cars, in Japan, it was bikes! It was quite a wonder for me to see hundreds of bicycles stacked together in front of malls and gliding through the sidewalks. Of course, cars also roamed in the streets, but they were few, as most people relied on only subway and bikes.

Although not as noticeable, traditional values were also found in the busy commercial settings, demonstrating a compromise of industry and Japanese culture. One of the broader examples of this would be the location of Osaka Castle, serving as both a historical relic and a park in the middle of an area of hundred-story buildings. Osaka Castle served as small natural sanctuary for individuals to relax and take a short jog in -- even in the hot summer days. On one occasion, my host mother and sister brought me to the park to watch a charity concert with age-old Japanese tunes, enjoying the music while watching the sun set behind Osaka Castle to create an array of bright colors.

In addition, in the basement of the 1670 feet tall Umeda Sky Tower, there was a maze of restaurants designed to imitate the buildings of the imperial eras. It was there that my fellow student

ambassador, Jacob, and I had our first taste of grilled *gyuutan* (beef tongue), a local delicacy, with our tour guides, Fitzgibbons-san and Ooyama-san. Large, colorful Tanabata lanterns, consisting of a round ball on top and wide strips of paper strewn below, also greeted us at Sky Tower's entrance and hallways, and being a popular spot for couples, even a "love shrine", imitating an old-style Shinto shrine, was constructed on the upper decks for visitors to pray in. What was the most surprisingly, however, was the "Sky Farm" on the roof of one of Umeda's tall department stores. Due to Japan's small island size, land preservation was a big deal in city architecture; however, it struck me as amazing that to add a taste of wildlife to the downtown area, Japanese corporations would even construct a garden on the 10th floor. Neatly organized into small square patches, tomato & berry plants, as well as bluebells and other flowers, covered the ground, and solar powered windmills kept the garden maintenance running. It was a simple yet breathtaking garden, where the plants stood at the same height as some of the other buildings' roofs.

Of course, Japanese cultural themes were not only visible in the city's surroundings, but also in the people as well. And with the exception of my exchanges with my host family and the I-House members, I explored this topic the most through Japanese festivities. Since summer had just "started" for Osakan people in July, with rainy season just ending, summer festivals at local shrines were more than abundant occurrences. Including the I-House's International Summer Festival and the famed *Tenjin Matsuri*, I was able to experience five of these summer festivals, and see the temple's various activities, as well as the attending people's reactions. Every shrine had their own date for the festival, and on the day, rows of booths would stretch through four or five streets, and crowds of people, both men and women, young and old, would fill the temple until there is barely any walking space left. The festival, although dimly lit, illuminated many shades of blue and pink from the booth signs and people's summer yukatas, and filled the air with the smell of candy apples, baby crepes, and savory *ikayaki* all at once. Children crowded the prize and fish-scooping booths, skillfully scooping dozens of small goldfish into their bowl. Some wore festival masks of popular cartoon characters, while others carried stuffed animals much too big for their height. The temple bell rang nonstop as people came to pray for success in the future, and the temple head gleefully answered questions posed about the temple's spirits, explaining that while the lion-like statues were supposed to guard the deities' home, the foxes served to keep the luck within the shrine. During the "boat procession" of the Ten'jin Matsuri, it was refreshing to see how many people would actually shout to the passing boats

with loud *Osaka-jime* greetings, demonstrating the lively spirit people still maintained in traditional events.

The greatest attractions, however, were the taiko and "dragon dance" performances, led by performers in their teens and twenties. Even though they were young, the performers were immersed in their art, and often garnered large crowds as they beat the drums with both elegance and strength, and imitated a dragon's flight with their arms. As my host family's residence was near *Ouji Jin'ja* (Temple), I watched as they practiced for weeks from noon to eight in the evening on temple grounds, eating a mere cup of noodles as dinner. Although this seemed to be a tiring task, most of the children and teens wore happy expressions throughout the rehearsal, and even competed for the chance to practice their taiko routine again. The *dan'jiri*, or portable shrine carts, were also pushed for miles by youth near my age, and were greeted by waves of cheers as they passed through the neighborhood. When I visited my host mother's friend, Sakai-san's, house for their family reunion, all twenty or so children in the house would rush out at the sound of the *dan'jiri* approaching, pushing the cart alongside the young men in red and white festival uniforms. Even though these festivals and practices have been taking place since centuries ago, Osakans continue to celebrate the old customs with enthusiasm, cheering for the traditional arts with fervor.

The most enriching part of the homestay, however, dwelled within the time spent with my host family, whom prioritized the old customs as the most important in the household. As my host father, whom I fondly called "Papa", was a Buddhist priest, and my host mother, "Sensei", was an Omote-Senke Tea Ceremony Master, it was without a doubt that they tried to teach me the old-style customs of Japanese life. At exactly seven o'clock every morning, my host father, dressed in his dark-blue priest garments, would ring the temple bell and begin his song of sutras, and on the days that I went down to pray as well, he slowly taught me how to use the Buddhist beads while silently speaking my greetings to Buddha. To follow along with the sutras he chanted, my host father even presented to me a book of the chants, filled with both the kanji depictions and the method of speaking.

Similarly, my host mother often granted me worldly advice in the way I thought of myself and others, and also taught me the significance of appearance in life situations. As the hostess of many charity events and tea ceremonies, Sen'sei would encourage me to help with the events' preparations, and to greet the visitors. On one of the days when we were preparing for a "*sayonara* party", Sen'sei

emphasized that every guest's plate arrangement had to be similar and in harmony with each other, as it is in the subtle table setting that we express how much we appreciate the guests' presence in the dinner as well as in our lives. The wooden chopsticks were to be inserted into holders with portraits of flowers for an element of respect to nature, and the cushions had to have the same design and size to convey that each guest was equally significant to the dinner. When preparing the meals, Sen'sei often added a leaf or two and a small flower to the plate for appeal, and chastised me for not arranging the pieces of a dish into a pattern before presenting it to the table. As we talked in the kitchen while preparing dinner, she would share small stories about her experiences, and explain to me cultural differences I experienced in Osaka.

To me, perhaps her most valuable lessons were taught through her art of *sadou*, or the tea ceremony. During the span of three weeks, I was allowed to participate in the tea ceremony thrice, where I not only met her many friends and relatives, but also found a type of peacefulness lying under the everyday busy-body life. Although *sadou* is often considered a visually-appealing art, aesthetics was actually among the more minor themes. The main goal of the art was to awaken an awareness of the connection between you and others in your soul. Once you entered the tea room, it was a completely different, solemn environment; the room was cool in contrast to the suffocating humidity outdoors, with subtle decorations, such as a pool of water, a tulip, and a ceramic glass pane of lotuses, to calm the soul. The goldfish-shaped sweets served before the *ocha*, or green tea, were symbolic of serenity, and varied depending on the season sadou was performed in. While it was usually inclined to keep a conversation with someone else going, *sadou* encouraged silence as a form of communication. With silence, you observed another's movements and expressions as their way of dialogue, and in that way, suddenly one's personality and emotions can easily be seen and understood. Using the minimal formalities in receiving the *wagashi* and tea, you are able to drop pretenses necessary in daily social interactions, and concentrate on establishing peace in your mind. The *seiza*, or traditional sitting position, also promoted this idea, as it demonstrates endurance and self-restraint in the soul.

In addition to Sen'sei's teachings in the tea ceremony practice, she often correlated the symbols in the art with her own interpretations. During the second time I tried the tea ceremony, Sen'sei explained that the small *sen'sou*, or fan, that we used was not to fan ourselves in the hot weather;

rather, it was to be placed behind our sitting mats as a symbol of peace in the tea room. As we open the *sen'sou*, we notice that all of the fan's parts are connected all by one small point at the end of the fan, and that point was called the *kaname*. "The *kaname* is an analogy to our own lives," Sen'sei described, "in that the broad range of possibilities in life, showed by the fan's *ougimen* area, stem from one point of origin; that we all start from the same beginnings and spread out into different paths as our dreams and motivations differ." It was a beautiful way to show the concept of individuality, with the imagery of a fan unfolding as a person's life.

On the final day of my homestay with Sen'sei, she also granted me an important life lesson as a parting gift. In the evening after dinner, she said to me, "The character for 'person' in Japanese can only be completed by two strokes: one longer stroke and one shorter stroke. And if we think of these two strokes in our minds as our conscience regarding ourselves and others, the longer stroke would be ourselves, and the shorter others. It is obvious that we need to think of ourselves first -- to survive, to chase dreams, and to be happy. However, we musn't forget the shorter stroke, for without the shorter stroke, it would not be the character for 'person', and the one longer stroke would not stand by itself. We have to remember to be compassionate, sympathetic, and thoughtful of others, and that is when we will be able to achieve true happiness."

As I departed on the plane back to San Francisco, those words continued to echo in my head. While I expected that the homestay to Osaka would affect my views of Japanese society and shed light to their spiritual morals, I never imagined that I would be impacted in such an interpersonal way, where my own beliefs would change from traditional arts and advice. It was plain to say that with their priority in natural preservation and festive spirits, Osakans live in a society that shows a consensus between technology and tradition -- one that not only affects their surroundings but also their thoughts as well. I am very grateful to have had such an enlightening experience in the Osaka, and even in a thousand words, in the length of this essay, I could never express my thanks enough to you, SFOSCA, for giving me such a beautiful memory to reflect back on, and to use as a basis for my life from here onwards.