

ベーらじゃ！  
Be-rajya!

Kuboi sensei often emphasized the concept of *omotenashi*—utmost hospitality without expectation of reward. He would tell us to “work for society, not yourself...take away suffering from other people and spread happiness.” Inspired by his words and my loving host families’ geniality, I reflected on these thoughts of selfless consideration and explored Osaka from a new perspective. There is more to the tale of summer’s jubilant festivities and timeless tradition. This was finally the moment to capture the present, preserve memories, and appreciate this priceless experience.

Sumiyoshi Taisha is one of Japan’s oldest shrines. Established in the third century before the influence of Buddhism and Asian mainland, the shrine exhibits a distinct architectural design called *Sumiyoshi-Zukuri*. Prior to entering the shrine, one must wash their hands and mouth at the *temizuya*—water-filled basin. Although most people may not give much thought as they wash themselves before entrance to the sacred grounds, the action itself holds a notable symbolic meaning. As I washed my left hand, right hand, mouth, then ladle handle, respectively, Teranishi-san, my second host mother, explained the ritual’s significance. “Humans commit bad actions with their hands and speak sins with their mouths. Therefore, prior to one’s visit to the *kami-sama*, we vow at the *temizuya* to no longer commit and speak sinful things...” This short lesson left me mind-boggled for the rest of the day. Intrigued by the tale that lies behind the simple act of washing one’s hands, curiosity sparks on what else I may discover right before my eyes.

The doors of the shrine are wreathed with a large thatch ring, that purifies visitors young and old. For over eighteen hundred years, the shrine’s people honor their *kami*, gods of

seafarers, agriculture, *waka* poetry, and diplomacy, by giving them annual reports on the human world and taking them across the city from Osaka to Sakai. It's truly breathtaking to see so many eager participants carry on this tradition, whether as a volunteer to heave the exquisite *omikoshi*—gilded portable shrine— or as a *yatai* —Japanese food stand— clerk who fervently shouts "*irrashaimase*, welcome!". The *yatai* clerk gives the so-called "extra service" by telling jokes and encouraging customers to purchase, which contributes to the liveliness in the bustling atmosphere. Kuboi sensei urged me to interview a *kakigori* (Japanese shaved ice) clerk on what he felt from giving "extra service". He told me, "Why not spread the happiness? Not only is it important to receive customer satisfaction, but it is also crucial to express gratitude to everyone. Of course, even if they don't patronize our shop," as he jokingly glares at his rival's shop, "it doesn't mean we can't appreciate them. Would you like some *kakigori*?"

As the *omikoshi* makes its way to Sakai City, it must follow its original route and cross the Yamato River. The *taiko* drums rhythmically unite the steps of the priests, paraders, and horses. Hundreds of volunteers jostle the *omikoshi* up and down through the river, chanting "*Berajya! Berajya!*" Upon reaching the sandy hill in the middle of the river, the group of carriers from Osaka make a grand exit as a new group of participants from Sakai trade off and carry the *omikoshi* to Sumiyoshi Taisha's second shrine located in Sakai City. From sunrise to sunset, the paraders dance along the streets, maintaining teamwork and perseverance. This made me wonder what was it that motivated so many individuals to march under the boiling sun. Was "*be-rajya*" just an ancient phrase shouted in name of tradition? How does Kuboi sensei's repeated words of *omotenashi* play a role not only in this festival, but also throughout my experience in Osaka?

Kaseda Keiji-san, one of the leaders of the *omikoshi* carriers, explained to us about the importance of human bonding and encouragement between *senpai* (upperclassmen) and *kouhai* (lowerclassmen). “We support each other and take turns switching out as we carry the *omikoshi*... There’s that indescribable feeling of achievement you become proud of both personally and as a team.” The sun painted the sky pink as the paraders continued to march into the distance followed by several horses carrying priests of high positions towards the final destination. Among the solemn priests, Sumiyoshi Taisha’s *gonguji*, head priest, smiled and waved to the crowd, occasionally stopping to take pictures with the crowd. Noting that the head priest’s friendly gestures were similar to what the *yatai* clerks also shared, Tomizawa-san, the head priest’s son, excitedly motioned me to come closer and take a picture with his father. He then beckoned me to follow him once more and introduced me to a young boy carrying a *shishi* lion. Gestured to bend down, I found myself gently “bitten” on the head by the lion for good luck. Looking up to the sky, I cheerfully jogged alongside the parade to take more photos.

After the parade, we gathered to eat our dinner *bento*, prepared by Teranishi-san’s friend who owned a humble vegetable shop in Sakai City. As we conversed over our meal, I brought up my curiosity for “*be-rajya*’s” meaning. No one at the table knew, but just as I was about to change the subject, Tomizawa-san did a bit of research to uncover the message behind this festival’s most repeated phrase. “*Be-rajya*” originated from the phrase “*heiraku*”: “*hei*” meaning peaceful, “*raku*” meaning fun and enjoyable, and “*ja*” as the ending particle, “*~desu*”. Stirred by the phrase, Kuboi sensei excitedly pointed out the importance of spreading happiness in correspondence to the phrase “*be-rajya*”. With cheers at the table for our mini discovery, we clinked our tea cups and shouted, “*be-rajya!*” instead of “*kanpai!*”.

Looking back to when my partner, Jasmine, and I first arrived, despite the unforeseen eight-hour wait in the rain upon our arrival, I recall my first few weeks in Osaka as incredibly welcoming. Typhoon Nangka struck Japan late Thursday, and lasted till Saturday bringing heavy rain and delays. Jasmine and I were exhausted and extremely worried for the city official who must have waited about four hours. Expecting to get scolded for our extremely late arrival, we were astounded by Osaka City government official, Koumoto-san's patience, kindness, and humbleness. It was midnight and the last train had already left. With no other choice of transportation, Koumoto-san waited with us an additional four hours for a taxi. Koumoto-san always made sure we understood our schedule and worried for our wellbeing.

On our first day, Yoshihara-san, our first host mother, broke the ice by conversing with us in clear, unambiguous Japanese as we gathered around an electric pan to make *takoyaki* together. She made sure to talk to both of us, not leaving either of us behind. I vividly remember her looking at our schedule, then asking us if we were interested in joining the *chanoyu* (tea ceremony) lesson which was conveniently scheduled that afternoon at her temple. Although she insisted it was a mere coincidence that the tea ceremony teacher was stopping by her house that afternoon, I realized that she probably had carefully planned the event after noticing that our interests in *chanoyu* were not included in our official schedule. That night, along with many neighbors, children, and Yoshihara-san's family, we ate *temaki*, hand rolled *sushi*, with our bare hands. Yoshihara-san told us that she had a tradition of serving *temaki* the first night for her foreign exchange guests. Her careful consideration for a foreigner's common struggle with chopsticks genuinely displayed *omotenashi*.

Upon arriving at Teranishi-san's traditional Japanese house, I paid my respects to the spirits of the residence by reciting Buddhist chants in the prayer room. As I closed my eyes and prayed, another voice suddenly began to chant along with me. Teranishi-san also followed Thai Buddhism and knew the sacred words by heart. It was truly a moment of connection. After our prayers, she gave me many books and resources about Buddhism all over the world. Her deliberation to connect with me left me in admiration for her compassion.

The simple, yet enigmatic phrase, "*be-rajya*" embodies the emotions of hospitality and gratitude. Over two thousand years ago, the Buddha taught that "thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle and the life of the candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases from sharing." *Omotenashi* resonated throughout my stay in the convivial city of Osaka. The sense of teamwork at Sumiyoshi Taisha's festival was tied with the respect of *senpai* and *kouhai* which sparked pride and happiness through achievement; the "extra service" provided by *yatai* clerks and charismatic store employees lightened the festivities; Yoshihara san's "happy temple home" and countless generous acts were comparable to having a second family; *ojii-san* (Teranishi-san's) photos of memorable images of our stroll during Sumiyoshi Taisha's festival decorated the farewell party and signified the amount of careful preparation; even the random moments of *obaa-san* senior ladies giving us *ame-chan* (free candy) expressed indiscriminate generosity. Interacting with different people in Osaka has inspired me to reciprocate these precious feelings by sharing my unforgettable experience. I am truly grateful for receiving the irreplaceable gift of opportunity and adventure.

