

100 Years of Culture and Traditions Workshop – New Year’s Symbolism
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This year marks the centennial anniversary of San Francisco’s Japantown. I am honored to be here to present the first workshop of this series, *100 years of Culture and Traditions* in celebration of the centennial. The Consulate General, having a profound admiration for the persistent and conscientious efforts made by the Japanese community over the past 100 years to maintain and develop Japantown, is committed to supporting all concerned parties in the celebration of this historic occasion.

The Japanese New Year holiday called *Osho-gatsu* begins on January 1, New Year’s Day. It is a national holiday and one of the biggest events on the calendar of annual festivities in Japan. Schools close for about two weeks of winter holiday before and after New Year’s, and most companies and government offices close for the New Year holiday around December 29 and January 3. Many people who have moved to the big cities return to their home towns for the holiday to be with family and friends. Personally, I think that New Year’s Day is distinct from other holidays as it is the most symbolic in many respects – it is not only a time to return home to be with your family, but also a time that reminds you that you are Japanese. We take this holiday very seriously.

To the Japanese, New Year is not merely the beginning of another year. For us the New Year holiday is a harbinger of new life and a chance for a fresh start. As the New Year holiday marks the beginning of a new chapter on life’s journey, a proper start must be made. In the days prior to the New Year holiday, Japanese wanting to start the new year with a fresh slate will try to conclude the past year’s remaining business such as clearing up outstanding debts and obligations. Companies hold an end of the year party called a *bonenkai* (forget the year party) to put the problems of the past year behind. Everyone gets good and drunk and employees freely criticize their bosses without fear of retribution as whatever is said when drunk is soon forgotten (or so it is hoped). On the night before New Year’s Day, temple bells ring throughout the land and on the 108th stroke at midnight, all the evils of the past year are dispelled and a fresh new year is welcomed.

Preparations for seeing in the new year were originally undertaken to greet the *toshigami* (deity of the incoming year). Not only one’s business but one’s home must be in readiness for the New Year: this is the all important custom of *susu-harai* (literally meaning soot-sweeping or year-end house cleaning). In preparation for the holiday, the front

entrance to each home is decorated with a pair of pine trees called *kado-matsu* on both sides of the entrance. At the back of each pine tree are placed three stems of bamboo. *Kado-matsu* is a symbol of purification or a talisman against evil. Above the front door of the house is hung the *shime-nawa* (taboo-rope). What is the taboo here? It is the evil spirits. So this means the house is clean and the evil spirits are taboo. It is a rope with tufts of straw and strips of white paper which hang from it at short intervals. Placed among the decorations are fern leaves (*daidai* or the bitter orange) and sometimes a lobster representing good wishes for a long, strong and prosperous life. Let's see what each item signifies. The pine tree because of its hardiness denotes long life; expanding good fortune throughout the coming year; the *daidai* orange has the same pronunciation as the Japanese word signifying "from generation to generation," and therefore could not be left out of the good wishes; and the lobster is supposed to suggest old age because of its curved back. Since the lobster's back is bent, this symbol expresses the special wish that one may enjoy a very long life until one's back is bent like that of a lobster. Just as I mentioned about punning with the word *daidai* orange, Japanese love puns, find delight in puns, and you will hear more of those when I talk about the New Year's foods.

As I previously mentioned on New Year's Eve or *omisoka*, Buddhist temples throughout Japan strike their bells 108 times to ring out the old and ring in the new (*joya-no-kane*). Usually *toshikoshi-soba* (year crossing noodles), a kind of buckwheat noodle soup, is eaten on *omisoka* to facilitate the passing of the old year in the hope that one's family fortunes will extend like the long noodles. Many people stay up well past midnight to watch the special New Year's programs on TV.

New Year's Day, or *ganjitsu*, for Japanese usually begins well before sunrise with a visit to the local shrine or temple to pray for a healthy and happy year. Families usually dress up for this occasion and traditional kimono is often worn. This is called *hatsu-mode* (first visit of the year to the shrine) and is one of the most important rituals of the year. Japanese usually greet people on the first day of the year with the expression, "*Akemashite omedeto gozaimasu*" (Happy New Year!) and "*kotoshi mo yoroshiku onegai shimasu*" (thank you for your kindness throughout last year and please grant me your kindness in the year to come). These expressions convey not only our wishes for a happy new year but also suggest that it is a time for renewing our personal relationships.

After *hatsumode*, families usually return home to enjoy a traditional Japanese New Year meal called *osechi-ryori* which is prepared just before the New Year and eaten between January 1 and 3. Although there are variations on this meal depending upon the family and region, it basically consists of boiled beans, broiled fish, *su-no-mono* (vinegared or pickled dish),

nishime (marinated root vegetables) and some other items. The New Year's Day feast also includes the drinking of *otoso*, a special rice wine which contains various medicinal herbs which are said to prevent sickness. Following this comes the eating of *ozoni*, a kind of soup consisting of fish or seaweed broth, bits of greens and toasted *mochi* (pounded and mashed rice cakes). *Mochi* is prepared by pounding steamed glutinous rice and is a very important food used on many auspicious occasions including New Year. *Mochi* is also used as a traditional offering to the *toshigami* (family deity) called *kagami-mochi*, (round mirror shaped rice cakes stacked one on top of the other) an indispensable symbolic item of New Year, and placed on the family *tokonoma* (alcove). The use of *kagami-mochi* on festive occasions could go back to as early as ninth century. Since ancient days, not only were *kagami-mochi* offered to deities and shrines on festive days, but also were placed in front of things the people valued highly to invite good luck. Samurai placed *kagami-mochi* in front of their boxes of armor; women before their mirrors (it is said the name *kagami-mochi* came from this practice) and merchants in their counting rooms. *Kagami-mochi* should be broken and eaten on January 11.

Now, let me tell you about *osechi-ryori*. You may have seen the special New Year's foods that are artfully arranged in three layered or sometimes five layered lacquer box called *jubako*. According to tradition, *osechi* has its earliest origins in a year-end ceremony that was introduced to the Imperial Court from China during the *Nara* period (eighth century). As part of the festivities, many small dishes were offered to the various deities, but these were not intended to be eaten. However, resourceful guests began bringing these offerings home in small boxes so they could satisfy their stomachs without unsettling the gods. Then, during the *Heian* period, these foods were given the name "*sechi-e*," and eventually the custom spread to commoners. The commoners started offering the foods in lacquer boxes so when the deities were full, they could take the food home and fill themselves.

The important thing to know about the *osechi* is that it consisted of dishes that tasted good even when cold and remained edible during the New Year holidays. Why is this so? Firstly, all businesses and shops were closed during the New Year holiday and you could not go out and buy food. Secondly, friends and relatives drop in on each other, so you have to have plenty of food ready to serve to these guests and thirdly, so that busy housewives could be liberated from cooking during this time. Naturally, *osechi* is prepared with lots of sugar, vinegar and salt to prevent bacteria from forming as well as to give the food a longer life.

Now, I would like to quickly share with you the names of some representative *osechi* food and the auspicious meanings they contain. *Kazunoko* (herring roe) means many children. It symbolizes prosperity for one's descendants because this delicacy consists of many eggs.

Kuromame, or black soy beans, are eaten in order to ensure that all family members will be healthy and robust, for while “*mame*” means beans, it also means “to be in good health.” *Gomame* (sweet and crispy dried sardines) symbolizes a bountiful harvest, as the original Chinese characters mean “fifty thousand years of rice.” *Kobu-maki* (rolled seaweed) signifies a pleasant and delightful new year, for the word “*kobu*” means seaweed but it is also a part of the word “*yorokobu*,” which means “be pleased.”

I should like to add that with the increasing number of working women, *osechi* has become a big seasonal industry. Nowadays, we can order *osechi* most anywhere from convenience stores to lavish department stores. What I would like to do personally is to spend a year-end holiday in my mother’s kitchen and learn how to make *osechi* so I could pass down the family tradition.

Here I would like to share with you a personal observation about *osechi*. *Osechi* often follows the fate of the turkey dinner for Thanksgiving Day. The first time when it is served, it tastes so good and we also eat it in appreciation for the great amount of preparation and work that went into it. It also adds to the taste when everyone in the family shares the meal together just like we do with the *osechi*. On or after the second day however, we begin to see reluctant faces at the table, especially those of young members of the family who usually would complain or whine for “anything but this.” Thus, mothers and/or grandmothers usually would end up having to consume *osechi* or turkey day after day until it was all gone. A good analogy, it is not?

Well, so much for New Year’s dishes. On New Year’s Day in times past, people played traditional games such as *utagaruta*, a card game that required the players to correctly identify the second part of a classical poem (the *Hyakunin-isshu*) after hearing the first half pronounced by a designated reader. Children often engaged in such traditional games as *tako-age* (kite flying), *koma-mawashi* (spinning tops), a sort of badminton called *hanetsuki*, *fuku-warai* (pasting on a funny face), and *sugoroku* (a kind of backgammon). But, I doubt that there are many Japanese children who would be engaged in such pastimes today as most of them would prefer playing their favorite video and computer games. The best part of the day for Japanese children is when they receive *otoshidama* (money given as a gift at the beginning of a year) from parents, relatives, and other adults they meet during the New Year holiday.

Usually on New Year’s Day, many people spend the day sitting around the *kotatsu* (table with heater) eating *mikan* (mandarin orange) and watching special New Year TV programs. People start visiting each other to exchange greetings for the New Year and other activities on

January 2. Private teachers of the various arts and crafts make a point of having their first meetings or classes on January 2 too. The night of January 2 is important, too, for it is then that one dreams his/her first dream of the year, *hatsu-yume*, a dream that reveals one's fate for the year.

Like the other annual festivities of Japan, the New Year holiday is a colorful patchwork of contrasting fabrics: ancient agricultural rituals and court observances; Shinto rites of purification or thanksgiving; Buddhist festivals of remembrance; historical and mythological events – all of them abundant in symbolism.

To close my presentation, I would like to quote Mock Joya from his book, “*Things Japanese*.” “The spirit of seriousness shown in the observance of the New Year comes from the conviction that the year, if started rightly, will bring success and fortune,” and in the celebration of the New Year holiday, Japanese have gathered together various experiences, wisdom and knowledge to start a new year in the right way. Thank you.

Sources:

1. Joya, Mock, *Things Japanese* (1958)
2. OSECHI RYOI: The Art of New Years Cuisine by Blake More (<http://snakelyone.com/osechi.htm>)
3. Nicol, C.W., *JAPAN The Cycle of Life* (1997)