

**SHIMANE PREFECTURE GRASSROOTS SUMMIT
CULTURAL EXCHANGE RELATIONSHIPS WITH JAPAN AND USA
MEMORABLE TRIP OF JULY 2013**



MEMORABLE TRIP TO JAPAN
July 1-19, 2013

Introduction

In 2013, I traveled to Japan as part of a Grassroots Summit cultural exchange sponsored by the John Manjiro Whitfield Commemorative Center for International Exchange in Tokyo. The Summit was held in Shimane Prefecture with opening session in Matsue. Following a week in Matsue I participated in a five-day post-summit trip to Sendai. After I had made the travel arrangements in the spring, I was offered an opportunity to travel to Kochi, where I had been in 2011, and also to Yokohama, where I had not visited since my Navy days in the mid-1960s. The following articles are short accounts on some of these exciting adventures.

My homestay in Shimane prefecture was done in Matsue where I was very lucky to have Ichiro and Takiko Yoshino as my very friendly host and hostess for my homestay. In Sendai my host family was Masataka and Akiko Tatsuda, who also were very hospitable. In Kochi I gave a lecture at the University of Kochi and was hosted by Dr. Joel Joos and Professor Loren Waller. I then went to Nahari and was hosted by Masako and Kimiko Sakamoto. My final stop was in Yokohama and was hosted there by Koichi Imazu and other members of the Yokohama Kurofune (Black Ships) Society.

The trip was my longest in Japan and I am very grateful to all my hosts and hostesses for their hospitality. I am also grateful to Ms. Hiroko Todoroki for all her planning and gracious friendship this year and in past years. Several persons have offered information, pictures, and editorial comments. I especially am grateful to Ms. Masae Coomber, who was my translator in Yokohama and has read my articles several times and offered editorial comments and additional information.
Domo arigato gazaimashita.

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SHIMANE PREFECTURE - LAND OF MYTHS

Shimane Prefecture is the land of myths and it is said that more Japanese myths originate in this area than any other area in Japan. I learned about many of these myths while attending a cultural exchange program called Grassroots Summit and sponsored by the Center of International Exchange in Tokyo. Certainly, other countries have myths, but what amazed me was the currency of Japanese myths in their everyday surroundings. I came to enjoy hearing about these myths and seeing the enjoyment of my hosts and guides in sharing myths with me.

There was a small island in Lake Shinji that I saw immediately as I peered out the window of my room in the Hotel Ichibata in Matsue, Shimane Prefecture, Japan. The small island, called Yomegashima, presented a beautiful view and appeared to be a good omen of things to come. However, the island seemed strange as it was the only one in this very large lake. I was soon to learn how it got there.

On the local tour the next day we were told that there once was a young newly-wed bride, who was desperately unhappy in her new home. She wanted to return to Matsue and one winter day started to walk across Lake Shinji on the ice to escape her wretched life. Unfortunately, before she reached the other side the sun warmed the ice and it melted, plunging the girl to her death. The gods witnessed her misfortune and raised the land where she drowned as a permanent resting place so her soul could see Matsue.

Early in the morning on the next day, I watched as many boats moved in front of the hotel and around the island in Shinji Lake. Each boat had only one person and they looked like fishermen. They sat in their boats without any activity and I was confused until by looking through my binoculars I observed a man look at his wrist watch. It was then I realized that the time was a few minutes before 6 AM and exactly at 6 AM all the men began clamming. All the clambers in boats to the right of the hotel clammed from their boat with big rakes with a steel basket, but to the left the men worked near their boats with smaller rakes while in the water at waist deep. The small Asiatic clams (Shijimi) they caught were found in several miso soup meals I was to eat while in Matsue and were quite tasty. I couldn't help but wonder about the unhappy girl that drowned and how many clambers knew this interesting myth of Lake Shinji.



The small island of Yomegashima in Lake Shinji surrounded by clamming boats

A possible myth told in Matsue, which sounds too sad to be true, is about the local daimyo, who in the Edo period wanted to build a second bridge over the Matsue River. The bridge supports kept sinking in the mud so he appealed to the gods for help. He was told he had to make a human sacrifice. So he invited the poor people from the other side of the river to a party and the 10th person that crossed the old bridge was captured and buried alive in the location of the proposed second bridge. Later the wife of the man killed stated that she asked her husband to take a second cup of tea that morning. If he had delayed his departure with the second cup, he would not have been killed. Now in Matsue when someone offers you a second cup of tea it is recommended that you accept it.

While attending a community center and making crafts with a group of kindergarten school children we learned about the most famous myth of Japan – Tanabata. This story was beautifully portrayed for the children on a flannel board with cut-out figures. The teacher, Mariko Sawada, described how two lovers in space were separated by the Milky Way. The man had been a farmer and the woman a weaver. When they fell in love they stopped working so the father separated them. Only once a year could they get together and that was on the seventh day of the seventh month (July 7th) on a bridge over the Milky Way formed by the wings of a flock of magpies. This myth has become a romantic story in Japan known by all. For the star gazers the story is represented by the stars Vega and Altair on either side of the Milky Way.



A kindergarten teacher, Mariko Sawada, telling Tanabata story on flannel board

Sawada-san taught about the Tanabata custom of writing a wish on a strip of paper and then tying the paper to a bamboo branch. I first learned of this Tanabata custom at the 2011 Grassroots Summit in Kochi Prefecture. I practiced the custom in Kochi and also in Matsue. In 2011, I optimistically wished for world peace, but unfortunately, I felt I had to make the same wish in 2013. We all made our individual wishes and tied the papers to the bamboo branch. Whether we wished for world peace or for two separated lovers to come together, we all hope that someday our wishes will come true.



David and Carol Rowley tying their Tanabata wishes on the bamboo branch

In olden days before television and all the electronic gadgets, stories were told by parents and teachers with a paper play, called kamishibai. These paper dramas originated in the 12th century by monks in Japanese Buddhist temples to tell moral lessons to folks that were mainly illiterate. Each part of the play was displayed in pictures and the words for that card were written on the preceding card, which had been placed on the back of the pack of display cards. Our local Shimane guide, Taeko Yamaguchi (Gucchi), told us the story of Yuki-onna, the Snow Woman, who had performed a good deed to a boy, but told him he must never tell anyone. Later in life he fell in love and married the Snow Woman, and not realizing who she was, he told the story on how the Snow Woman had saved him. Unfortunately for the boy, by telling the story and breaking his promise, the Snow Woman immediately vanished!!!!



Taeko Yamaguchi displaying kamishibai of Yuki-onna, the Snow Woman

The Shimane Prefecture is also famous for the Izumo Taisha Grand Shrine in Izumo City. Our Grassroots Summit held the opening session of our visit at the shrine. The Shrine was constructed in the 8th century and at that time was the tallest building in Japan. When we were there it was going through a major traditional renovation that occurs every 60 years. The shimenawa (rice rope) in front of the outer Shrine weighs 5 tons and is the largest one in Japan. Shimenawa is used for ritual purification in the Shinto religion and is believed to ward off evil spirits. They are often seen at sacred landmarks like Shinto Shrines and torii gates.

This Izumo Taisha Grand Shrine is well-known in Japan as the place where all the gods meet in October of each year for their annual meeting. Other prefectures in Japan are considered to be godless at this time. Mr. Taizo Watanabe, the Chairman for the Center for International Exchange, said a prayer at the Inner Shrine during our visit. He told me it is very seldom visitors are allowed to see the Inner Shrine and we were very lucky. Indeed we were lucky, but also much honored.



Massive 5-ton shimenawa (rice rope) on outer shrine



Mr. Watanabe at inner shrine with priest's assistant

For reasons not totally clear to me, I found that Japanese people seem to love myths and the Shimane Prefecture is nationally known as the land of myths. The mythical stories and also the relationship with the gods in Japan have been handed down by Shimane elders to each new generation for hundreds of years. Originally the myths probably had good lessons to be given to the public, especially to the children. Now although used less as a moral teaching they add an interesting dimension to the Japanese culture. If you like mythical stories and a close relationship with the gods like I do, the Shimane Prefecture is the place to go, but relax while there and have a second cup of tea!!



A new day arrives at Lake Shinji in Matsue