

TOMB OF THE UNBORN BABIES

When I was in Matsue, Japan, my host family, Ichiro and Takiko Yoshino, escorted me to a coastal area and, after a short but wet boat ride, we visited a cave (Kyu-kukedo) that is called the tomb of the unborn babies. The cave contains hundreds of little statues, toys, and flowers left by many visitors. There also were hundreds of small piles of stones that are said to be placed at night by the children for their bereaved parents and siblings. However, I did note that both my host and I made a small pile ourselves. This naturally-made cave is apparently hundreds of years old and represents the area where the souls of babies that were dead at birth or shortly after are believed to congregate. There are some sad economic periods in Japan's history when children (especially females) were not always welcomed and some mothers gave up their babies.

Although you can see the cave site from boat you have to leave your boat at a landing and walk through a long (about 100 meters) human-made tunnel to reach the cave. Many Japanese, who have lost children, visit this site each year and say prayers for their loved ones. While there I lit some sticks of incense and said a prayer for two nieces of mine, Mary Isabel and Laura, who both died within their first day of life. The cave, shaped like a mother's womb, gives comfort to many Japanese. They feel Jizo Bodhisattva, the protector of children's souls, will ward off demons and save the children. Bodhisattva means enlightened, but at a lower state than Buddha.



Lighting incense for souls of unborn babies

The red bib on the stone statue of Jizo at the cave, and also seen on Jizo statues throughout Japan, intrigued me. My questions about the bib received several different answers from guides. The most prevalent explanation is that bereaved mothers originally placed a saliva-stained bib of their child on a Jizo statue in hopes that the child could be found by Jizo. The tradition continues today with new bibs, which in practically all cases are red. Red is believed to be the color to ward off evil spirits. Sometimes a hat or other clothes are placed on Jizo statues, which is hoped to keep the lost child warm.



Entrance of tunnel to cave



Ichiro Yoshino in tunnel to cave



M. Perry in cave tomb of unborn babies

The Jizo statues played a role during the Edo period when Christianity was banned in Japan. A rebellion against a local daimyo occurred in 1637-38 in a southwestern area of Japan on the Shimabara Peninsula. The local daimyo had increased taxes to build a new castle and the poor peasants, mostly Catholic Christians converted by the Portuguese settlers, revolted. During the rebellion the rebels chopped the heads off of many statues of Jizo. The Shogunate was outraged and sent overwhelming forces to Shimabara to suppress the rebels. The castle the rebels were holding was eventually recaptured and the rebel leader and all followers were beheaded. Christianity went underground when it was banned by the Shogunate for over 200 years.

Following the treaty between Japan and the United States in 1854, Commodore Perry was allowed to bury three of his dead sailors in Japanese soil in Shimoda with a combined Christian and Buddhist ceremony. However, a period of unrest occurred for another 12 years between the samurai forces and the rebels preferring the return of the Emperor. More Christians were killed during the unrest and in Yokohama there is a Foreigners Cemetery for the dead Christians. Fortunately, this period of unrest over religion ended with the return of the Emperor in 1868 and Japan now has a tolerant attitude concerning religious preference that is very admirable.

Each year the Japanese observe a period called Obon. It typically is in August, but in one area of Japan that I visited in 2013, it was observed in July, due to the busy rice harvest season in August. I was asked to participate in the traditional dance of Obon (Bon-odori) that welcomes the spirits of all the dead ancestors back to earth. After the long somber dance with a chanter singing, a man beating a gong, and many participants in traditional garments, there is a feast with family and friends.



Obon host, Tateshi Nakayama, M. Perry, and Tateshi's son, Hitoshi.

The Obon period also is a time when Japanese family members visit the graves of their ancestors and pay homage to them. It is a great tradition and I was happy to participate in the Obon observance with my Japanese friends on my recent trip. The Japanese appear to have a great respect for their deceased relatives. Whether it is a baby dying at birth or a senior living a full life, the respect for their dead relatives is a very admirable tradition that other countries and cultures should try to emulate to a greater degree.



Traditional Obon dance with drummer and singer



Red bibs on statues of Jizo



Children attending the Obon festival