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The Candle Night Newsletter #33
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Candle Night Committee

In the summer of 2009, a dynamic political shift happened in Japan. People keep an eye on how the new administration, led by the Democratic Party of Japan, changes the politics in Japan.

Topics

- * A Ceremony to Send Insects Off --"Mushi Okuri"
- * Turn off the Lights and Watch the Stars on October 17--Lights-Down Event in Kofu Valley
- * Winter Solstice is Approaching

A Ceremony to Send Insects Off --"Mushi Okuri"

Stories related to candles, fire, lights and darkness

"Mushi Okuri" (literally, "sending insects off") is a traditional ceremony to expel insects and pray for the year's bumper crops. It is an old tradition, but still observed in some places across Japan in early summer. In this issue, we would like to introduce the ceremony that has been practiced for about 300 years in the Hitoyama area of Tonosho-cho, Shodo-shima, Setonaikai, or the Inland Sea.

The ceremony is held on the eleventh day from the summer solstice (called "han-gesho" in Japanese), right after the rice planting work is finished.

At dusk, adults and children in the area participate in a 1.5-kilometer torchlight procession that starts at the local shrine "Rikyu-Hachiman" and ends at the Horai Bridge. The procession moves slowly through footpaths between rice fields. The torchlight in the rice fields makes a beautiful atmosphere.

On July 2, 2009, about 150 residents joined the ceremony.

It started with making a special fire for the torches. At Tammonji Temple, one of the 88 temples in Shodo-shima, a candle was lit with a solar lens. The candle was carried into the hall of the temple where people said a prayer for the bumper crops. Then a service was held for the insects to be expelled.

After the service, the torchlight procession started. People were given fire for their handmade torches called "hote" (literally, "fire hand"), and headed to the rice paddy fields.

Keiho Fujimoto, chief priest of the Tamonji Temple, said, "In the past, the ceremony was to get rid of insects, but nowadays it is not. It is a traditional ceremony mainly for children. Elderly residents in the area teach children how to make torches. Local people also enjoy participating in the procession."

In the past, the procession was relayed to the next villages, pushing the insects out to the sea. Currently, however, the ceremony is observed only in the Hitoyama area. The procession ends at the Horai Bridge of the Dempo River, which runs into the Inland Sea. The torches are placed in the river and the ceremony ends.

Pests cause serious problems for farmers. The ceremony, which is not only held to expel insects, but also to hold a service for them, reminds us that people live with the nature --insects are a part of nature.

There are other traditional ceremonies and events held around the area. For example, at Rikyu-Hachiman Shrine, village "kabuki" performances are held every May. Neighborhoods around the shrine take turns organizing the kabuki stage. When the farmers organize a kabuki performance, it is great local entertainment.

On the islands of the Inland Sea, a large art festival is planned from July to October 2010. Mushi Okuri and village kabuki will be over by then, but if you have a chance to visit the area, please go and enjoy it.

<http://setouchi-artfest.jp/en/>

(Yuko Kishikami)

Turn off the Lights and Watch the Stars on October 17--Lights-Down Event in Kofu Valley

A lights-out and star-gazing event will be held in Kofu City, Yamanashi Prefecture in Japan. Kofu City is about a two-hour express train ride from Tokyo. The event was launched by an organizing committee of "Lights-Down Kofu Valley" in 1999, with the slogan of "passing a beautiful starry sky with the Milky Way onto the next generation." The committee is planning an event on October 17, 2009, from 20:00 to 21:00, calling for citizens to turn off unnecessary lights around Kofu valley and look up to see the stars.

<http://lightdown-kofu.dreamblog.jp/> (Japanese)

There are many good spots for star-gazing in Yamanashi Prefecture. It is a lovely event in which the whole city turns off as many lights as possible and people look up to watch the starry skies.

As we mentioned in Candlenight Newsletter #31, the year 2009 marks the 400th anniversary of the first astronomical observation by Galileo Galilei, an Italian scientist. Many star observing events are held around the world to celebrate 2009 as the International Year of Astronomy. Please check and see if there are any events going on in your area.

(Yuko Kishikami)

Winter Solstice is Approaching

The winter solstice of 2009 is on December 22 in the northern hemisphere. If you haven't had an opportunity to enjoy Candle Night, we welcome you to join this time and share a slow moment, away from your busy everyday lives.

<http://www.candle-night.org/english/>

Editor's Note

Omi-Hachiman City, located in the center of Shiga Prefecture, is a 40-minute train ride from Kyoto. The city has been known as a town of merchants and water for a long time. Part of the old townscape still remains in the area. I recently visited the town on one beautiful autumn day and happened to find myself at the local festival of "Hachimanbori Matsuri." At night, streets were lit with candles placed in glass bottles or bamboo baskets, showing traditional scenery in the candlelight. The flickering candlelight atmosphere is something special. (KY)

We also invite your local stories, festivals and events related to candles and fires. Please send emails to: eninfo@candle-night.org

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Candle Night Committee

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