

Asian Odyssey

A National K-12 Interdisciplinary Curriculum Model

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Japanese Festivals and Celebrations

Grade Level

This lesson is intended for an Asian Studies high-school class. It can be adjusted for grades 9-12.

Purpose

To investigate how art is used to depict Japanese festivals and to examine how the emphasis on nature and a sensitivity to the seasons are reflected in these celebrations.

Concepts

- *byobu*—a Japanese folding screen
- *hanami*--cherry-blossom viewing
- *hoko*--giant floats on wheels pulled by people
- lunar calendar--a calendar where the months and days are determined by the full moon
- *matsuri*--festival
- *obagies*--sweet rice dumplings often eaten during festivals
- pampas--a type of grass or autumn vegetation that is used as an offering during the *tsukimi* (moon-viewing) festival
- *sakura*--cherry blossoms
- *shikishi* (poem papers)--small square or rectangular sheets of cardboard-backed paper. At court during the Heian period (794-1185) a particular *byobu* provided a selected theme, such as “Pampas Grasses,” for a poetry contest between teams. The poems were brushed in ink on the decorated papers and attached to the *byobu* for inspection and contemplation. Themes included seasonal landscapes, festivals, or other subjects.
- *susuki*--pampas-grass arrangements
- *tsukimi*—moon-viewing
- *yama*--portable floats or shrines carried by people on their shoulders

Key Ideas

- The Japanese have many holidays and festivals that celebrate a variety of occasions and events. Some are national holidays and some are local celebrations steeped in traditional customs and beliefs.
- Some examples:
 - The coming of age (*Seijinohi*)
 - Beginning of spring (*Setsubun*)
 - Children’s Day (*Tango no Sekku*)
 - New Year’s (*Shogatsu*)
 - Commemoration of dead ancestors (*Obon*)
 - Star Festival (*Tanabata*)
 - Emperor’s Birthday (*Tenno no tanjobi*)

- The warding off of epidemics and disasters (*Gion Matsuri*)
- Seven-Five-Three (*Shichigosan*)
- Moon-viewing (*Tsukimi*)
- Since wet-land agriculture is the basis of much of Japan's food production, many festivals are connected to the farming cycle. Spring festivals are held to pray for good crops and autumn ones to offer thanks for the harvest.
- Fishing is also important in terms of providing food and many festivals are dedicated to the ocean and those who work on it.
- Summer festivals aim at warding off disease (epidemics frequently occurred in summer)
- The coming of the cherry blossoms is a happy event in Japan because it heralds in the coming of spring (rebirth). At the same time, the blossoms fall to the ground and disappear in a matter of a few weeks, reflecting the Buddhist belief in the brevity and transitory nature of life.
- To celebrate the *sakura*, or cherry blossoms, Japanese hold *hanami*, or flower-viewing get-togethers and picnics. Some people write poetry to capture the viewing moment, which in ancient days would be attached to screens (*byōbu*).
- The moon-viewing ceremony or festival (*tsukimi*) takes place on a night in mid-autumn. It celebrates the fall hues, the striking colors of trees against mountainous background, the sound of autumn insects, and the importance of the rice-harvest all under a very full moon. During this ceremony, the Japanese often offer rice dumplings and pampas grass to the moon.
- Both the cherry-blossom festival and the moon-viewing ceremony are examples of the Japanese regard for natural beauty and reflect the Buddhist principle of "becoming one with nature."

Materials (Select 2 or 3 of your choice)

Narihira Viewing the Cherry Blossoms, later 1800s, CMA 1981.2

Ants Hauling a Pumpkin, 1400s, CMA 1988.16

Woman Looking at the Moon, 19th century, CMA 1985.260

Spring Dance Scene, 17th century, CMA 1985.270

Horse Race at Kamo Shrine, first half of the 17th century, CMA 1976.95.1

Festival Scenes, 17th century, CMA 1985.279.2

Procedure

1. Link on to CMA web site (www.clevelandart.org) or provide students with copies of CMA images.
2. Discuss: *Narihira Viewing the Cherry Blossoms*.
 - a. What is going on in this screen painting?
 - b. Describe some of the details
 - c. What seems to be the focus of the painting
 - d. Have you ever seen anything like this before?
 - e. Who are the people?
 - f. What can you guess about their personalities or lifestyle?
3. Discuss: *Ants Hauling a Pumpkin*.
 - a. What season is it? How do we know?
 - b. What are the ants doing? Look closely at each ant.

- c. What do the ants symbolize? What is happening?
 - d. What does the pumpkin symbolize? (a float)
 - e. What does the painting as a whole symbolize?
 - f. What type of celebration does this painting depict?
 - g. What can we learn about Japan from this?
4. Discuss *Woman Looking at the Moon* and ask how it relates to the moon festival.
 - a. What season does it appear to be? How can you tell?
 - b. Describe what you believe this woman is thinking?
 - c. What is the Japanese term for moon viewing?
 5. Have students look at *Horse Race at the Kamo Shrine*. Explain that horse racing goes back for many centuries in Japan. Horses that were donated to shrines were frequently used in yearly festivals, which often featured a horse race with local aristocrats as riders. The objective was for the horse to finish the race, not necessarily the rider. The local people would attend these races armed with long poles with which they attempted to dislodge riders, a reversal of normally accepted social behavior that happened only at these festivals.
 - a. Where do the horses live? (behind the shrine in the stables with the red roof and the red gate)
 - b. Who are riding the horses? (aristocrats)
 - c. How can you tell?
 - d. Who are the people in the small gazebo in the center of one of the screens? (important spectators sitting in the equivalent of today's box seats)
 - e. Who is the winner? A person? A horse?
 - f. Are the patrons all of one class?
 6. Hand out enlargements of the vignettes in the *Festival Scenes* screen. Have students write stories based on one of the scenes. Ask them to describe in words some of the details they saw in the images.

Enrichment

- A. Stage a classroom seasonal festival. As a means of commemorating a season, collectively pick something that is stereotypical of that season in your region. This will become the theme of a poetry competition. Choose something that the students are able to sit and view directly; they must be able to contemplate. Perhaps the class could go outside to view a tree (fall colors), spring flowers, snow, or anything typical of a season in your school area.
- B. Have each student write a five-line poem on 3 x 5 note cards. Five-line poems are called tankas; they have 31 syllables, with lines of 5,7,5,7, and 7. Students should then read their own or each other's poems. Or divide students into groups of four or five and have each group write a tanka. Invite other teachers to listen and vote on which team wins.
- C. Have the students paint a "screen" or mural in watercolors to depict that season.
- D. Research Japanese holidays and festivals; distinguish between those that are national holidays and those that are regional or local festivals and celebrations. Explain the history and tradition behind a minimum of six to eight holidays and festivals.
- E. Ask students to write an essay comparing and contrasting a particular holiday, celebration, or festival common to them with any Japanese holiday or festival.
- F. Have students make sweet rice dumplings or *obagies*. These are often part of the moon-viewing festival and other celebrations (see recipe below).

Ohio State Standards

Diffusion: Analyze the ways that contact between people of different cultures result in exchanges of cultural practices and perspectives.

This lesson plan was prepared by Bonnie Morosi, Beachwood High School, Beachwood, Ohio

OBAGIES

Sweet Rice Dumplings

The Japanese call these rice dumplings *obagies*.

Categories: Japanese, Vegetarian

Yield: 9 servings

3c Water

1½ c Sweet brown rice, uncooked

1pn Sea Salt

¾c Raisins

¾ ts Cinnamon

2 ½ c Shelled walnuts

DIRECTIONS:

Bring water to boil in a 2-quart saucepan. Add rice and salt, cover and reduce heat to medium. Cook for one hour. (Check to see if more water must be added to prevent sticking.) Remove from heat and let cool for 5 minutes.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.

Mix half the raisins and half the cinnamon into half of the rice and process mixture thoroughly through a grain mill. (If you do not have a grain mill, use a Champion Juicer with a grinder attachment or pound mixture into a paste in a wooden bowl.) Repeat with remaining rice, raisins and cinnamon.

Place walnuts on a baking sheet and roast in over and let cool. Coarsely grind or finely chop walnuts.

Measure rice into 2 ½ tablespoon portions. Moisten hands and shape dumplings.

Roll each dumpling in walnuts to coat. Serve immediately.

Per 2 dumplings: 361cal, 11 g prot, 21 mg sod, 38 g carb, 21 g fat, 0 mg chol, 36 mg calcium

HINTS: to speed up cooking process, place rice in a pressure cooker with 2 ¼ cups of water and cook for 40 to 45 minutes. Remove from heat and let cool until pressure goes down.

Dumplings can be stored in the refrigerator for several days. Reheat in over when ready to serve.

*Source: Chef Ron Pickarski, Vegetarian Gourmet (Autumn 1993)