

Japanese New Year's Celebration

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## *Introduction*

Most of cultures in the world have celebrated New Year's Day annually. The way of the celebration would be really cultural, traditional, and unique in each culture. For example, for American people, Christmas tends to be religiously the more important event rather than New Year's Day while the celebration of Times Square New Year's Eve is a world-famous event (Never Matome, 2010). In Ethiopia, New Year's Day is on September 1<sup>st</sup>, and in Brazil, people celebrate New Year with dancing and drinking (Never Matome, 2010). The topic of this paper is about Japanese New Year's celebration, focusing on one Japanese family. In Japan, New Year's Day is from January 1 to 7. During this period, most of schools and companies are closed, so people spend the holidays with their families and friends. Actually, it is not an exaggeration to say that New Year's Day is the biggest annual event for Japanese people because it is said that New Year's celebration is the oldest annual event in Japanese history (Encyclopedia of Japanese culture, 2008). There are many customs practiced in Japanese New Year's Day, and these customs range broadly from traditional decoration to foods. Then, this paper describes some of them as giving my experience about New Year's celebration. Also, I interviewed on my mother, Yukari Hamada, to share and get information about Japanese New Year's Day. As referring the customs of New Year's celebration, this paper offers not only culture and tradition Japanese people have been following, but also their beliefs and values.

## *New Year's Eve*

For Japanese people, New Year's Eve is as important as New Year's Day. New Year's Eve is called "Omisoka" in Japanese, and it is on December 31. On this day, people clean up the inside of their houses. This custom derives from the belief that New Year's Day is when the God

of New Year would come to each home to give luck of that year to people (Miura 2013). That is the basic concept of various customs in Japanese New Year's celebration. Therefore, they clean up their houses to welcome the God and New Year. In fact, it is said that the cleaner the house is, the more the God of New Year brings and gives luck. However, many Japanese people especially the young do not know the reason why they celebrate New Year's Day. In my family, we spend almost all day cleaning up our house on New Year's Eve because we clean up every inch of the house. When I get up, my parents already start cleaning, and my mother tells me and my sister which part of the house we should clean. My father moves heavy furniture like a big shelf to clean the back of the furniture, and he is also put in charge of cleaning the drain of the bathroom. My mother cleans up whole of the kitchen, vacuums the floor, and removes the dirt on everything in the house. I and my sister are responsible for cleaning up our rooms and wipe all of the windows of the house. After getting the house clean, my mother sets up some decorations. One of them is called "Kagami Mochi". This is two round rice cakes. On a bigger rice cake, a smaller rice cake is put on, and a small Japanese orange is put on the top of the rice cakes. Some Kagami Mochi is decorated with zigzag papers and leaves. The role of Kagami Mochi is to work as a place where the God of New Year would stay (Miura, 2013). In addition to Kagami Mochi, my mother hangs "Shimekazari" on the front door of my house. During New Year's Days, people can see Shimekazari all over Japan. This decoration is made from rice straws, and these are tied in a skilled way to make a rope. Then, small orange, zigzag papers, and leaves are decorated on Shimekazari. The shape of Shimekazari has many kinds, and most of people buy it before New Year's Day. Shimekazari indicates that the house is the sacred place where the God would visit and stay. A small orange which is decorated with Shimekazari has a meaning of flourish of generations. Zigzag papers symbolize descending of the God, and leaves represent

descendant prosperity. As another Japanese New Year's decoration, some private houses and companies, and most of shrines display a pair of "Kadomatsu" in front of the entrance. In Japan, bamboo represents luck and a place where God would stay. Kadomatsu is composed of three bamboo shoots that have different heights. These are brought together in the center of the base of Kadomatsu, and tied in bunch. Kadomatsu works as a mark for the God of New Year to come to the house without hesitation (Miura, 2013). The last event on New Year's Eve in my family is eating "year-crossing noodles" around 11 p.m. before New Year starts. This custom is also Japanese traditional one. These noodles are called "Soba" and made from buckwheat. The color of the noodles is gray. My mother puts the noodles in hot soup flavored with fish, kelp and soy sauce. Then, she puts battered and deep fried shrimps called "Tempura" on Soba. After that, she finishes with putting small pieces of citron's skin. A citron looks like a small orange and has specific citrus smell. The long noodles represent the long life. In addition, Soba signifies economic fortune, and it is said that eating Soba before New Year starts would bring economic fortune (Miura, 2013). Therefore, people eat year-crossing noodles on New Year's Eve, hoping to live long and get lucky in money.



注連飾り  
(しめかざり)  
Shimekazari



*Kagami Mochi.*  
*Note: Copyright Takumi, 2007.*

*Shimekazari.*  
*Note: Copyright Hiroki, 2011.*

*Kadomatsu with zigzag  
 paper (gohei) Note:*  
*Copyright Gary Akiko, 2006*

*New Year's Day*

My family do countdown to New Year with a countdown of TV program. When New Year starts, we greet “Happy New Year” with each other. Then, we sleep for New Year’s celebration. When I get up, my mother is preparing for breakfast. This breakfast is very special one for New Year’s Day because we have traditional foods in the breakfast, “Zoni” and “Osechi”, and use Japanese traditional dishes for the meal of New Year’s Day. At 8 or 9 a.m., my family members sit around a dining table. Before we start eating, my father greets “Happy New Year” and “I hope we will get along and support each other this year too”, and the other family members repeat several parts of his words with casual bow. After that, my father opens Japanese alcohol called “Sake” and put it in a small and flat cup called “Sakazuki” whose color is red. Sakazuki is Japanese ceremonial cup that is used in a wedding ceremony and so on. My family calls the Sake, which is served in New Year’s celebration, “Otoso”. My family members have to drink or sip Otoso with Sakazuki in order of age. Even when I was a child, I had to sip Otoso before the breakfast. After my father drinks a cup of Omiki, my mother pours and drinks it using the same Sakazuki, and then I and my younger sister repeat the process with the same Sakazuki. In fact, passing a cup of Omiki on New Year’s Day is my family’s specific custom. My mother, Yukari Hamada, tells “We drink Otoso in order to celebrate New Year’s Day. I think it is a common thing in Japan to drink alcohol in celebratory occasions.” Moreover, she talks about drinking Otoso in order of age with the same Sakazuki. – “It is the tradition in my home country that the center of the family, I mean father, can drink Otoso at first following the hierarchy of the family. I don’t know why we use the same Sakazuki when drinking Otoso. Because we have

only one Sakazuki at home (, we use the same Sakazuki)? Seriously, I think drinking Sake with the same Sakazuki represents Japanese traditional way of strengthening the tie between members of a group.” After drinking Omiki, we can start having a meal. The foods on table are traditional ones for New Year’s Day. These are “Zoni” and “Osechi”. Zoni is rice cakes in hot soup. The style of Zoni is different in each family and region. In my family, my mother uses about three inch diameter round rice cakes, and she boils them with soup made from soy sauce and Japanese stock soup flavored with fish and kelp. After she puts the rice cakes and soup in each bowl, she finishes with topping small pieces of citron’s skin. On New Year’s Eve, she asks us how many rice cakes we want to eat on New Year’s Day in order to prepare for Zoni. Basically, I and my sister eat two rice cakes apiece. My father eats at least five rice cakes. He has ever eaten twenty rice cakes on New Year’s Day. When my parents eat Zoni, they put too much dried laver seaweed to see rice cakes. That is their home town’s style. In addition to dried laver seaweed, my father puts sweetened black beans on Zoni. In other families or regions, people use square rice cakes, and they bake these rice cakes before put them in soup of Zoni. Some people cook Zoni’s soap flavored with fish and soy sauce, and other people use “Miso” to season the soup. Miso is Japanese common seasoning made from fermented soy beans. Moreover, there are some regions where people cook sweetened soup for Zoni with sugar and adzuki beans. In terms of topping, vegetable, seafood, tofu and other things are put on Zoni, and these kinds of toppings are different in families and regions. The reason why people eat Zoni on New Year’s Day is attributed to Kagami Mochi. As mentioned earlier, Kagami Mochi is displayed as the place where the God of New Year would stay. People in the past believed that the power of the God would be given to Kagami Mochi, and they expected to get the power of life from the God through eating Kagami Mochi (Miura, 2013). Nowadays, many people do not eat Kagami Mochi

but they buy other rice cakes for Zoni at super markets. My family also does not eat Kagami Mochi though we display it on New Year's Day. My grandmothers make rice cakes and send them with other foods for New Year's celebration before New Year starts, so we can eat Zoni made of home-made rice cakes.



*Zoni of my family's style. Note: Copyright Benosuke, 2011.*

In addition to Zoni, people eat “Osechi” that is another traditional food for New Year's celebration. Osechi is composed of many kinds of dishes, and these dishes are put together in large boxes called “Jubako”. Jubako looks like bento boxes. Jubako is composed of three or five boxes that are stacked before and after eating Osechi. Generally, the color of Jubako is black or red, and the pattern of Jubako is various. Osechi dishes people put in Jubako tend to depend on each family and region, and that is passed down person to person. In fact, People used to cook most of Osechi dishes at home, but now some people buy these dishes at super markets and others book fine Osechi at department stores before New Year's Day. On the other hand, there are some families who do not use Jubako or do not eat Osechi on New Year's Day. In my family, my grandmothers send many Osechi dishes, so my mother put them in black Jubako that is

composed of three large boxes whose color is black. This Jubako has the pictures of gold flower of Japanese plum. She buys and cooks other Osechi dishes, and puts them with my grandmothers' Osechi dishes in the Jubako. Osechi is treated as the dishes for the God of New Year, and through eating Osechi, it is said that people can strengthen the tie between people and the God and the God would give them luck of that year (Miura, 2013). Each Osechi dish has a specific meaning and wishing. For example, some of my family's Osechi is composed of simmered vegetables called "Nishime", sweet mashed chestnuts called "Kuri-Kinton", simmered shrimps, herring roe called "Kazunoko", sweetened black beans called "Kuro-Mame", sweet rolled omelet that is mixed with fish paste called "Datemaki", and other dishes. Nishime represents a peaceful family because various kinds of vegetables are simmered together in a pot (Rediscovery of good Japan, 2013). Nishime of my family is made of not only vegetables but also other ingredients. My mother cooks Nishime with Japanese mushrooms, tofu, royal ferns that is one of Japanese wild plants, bamboo shoots, Japanese butterburs, kelps, meats of octopus, and Japanese radishes. She simmers these ingredients with soy sauce, sugar, water, alcohol, and soup stock flavored with fish and kelp until almost all of the soup boil away. Next, Kuri-Kinton is mashed chestnuts with sugar. The name "Kuri-Kinton" is composed of three Chinese characters - "Kuri" meaning chestnuts, "Kin" meaning money and gold, and "Ton" meaning gathering. Therefore, Kuri-Kinton symbolizes good luck of money (Rediscovery of good Japan, 2013). Shrimp is another typical Osechi dish. My mother simmers shrimps of middle size without peeling the heads and skins. When we want to eat them, we peel the heads and skins of the shrimps. Shrimp symbolizes a wish of living a long life in that a shrimp is bent over like the elderly (Rediscovery of good Japan, 2013). Kazunoko has many small eggs of herring, so it symbolizes a wish of having many children in that year. Sweetened black beans, "Kuro-Mame", represent health (Rediscovery of

good Japan, 2013). These black beans are simmered with sugar and soy sauce. Finally, Datemaki is rolled omelet mixed with fish paste. Datemaki symbolizes a wish of cultural development and accomplishment of learning in that the shape of Datemaki looks like a Japanese classic book (Rediscovery of good Japan, 2013). Thus, Osechi include many dishes, and each dish has a specific meaning and wish. My family has this traditional breakfast from January 1 to 3 or more until we eat all of Osechi dishes.



*Osechi dishes of Reiko. Note: Copyright Bio, 2009.*



*Datemaki. Note: Copyright Kyoto Osechi Tuuhan Shop, 2014.*

As my family celebrate New Year with Zoni and Osechi, my father gives me and my sister some money, called “Otoshidama”. This is one of Japanese customs on New Year’s Day. Most of Japanese children look forward to New Year’s Day because of this custom. Generally, adults have to give Otoshidama to blood- related children. Some people give Otoshidama to their friends’ children. Sometimes, those who are not children but go to school like college students are given Otoshimada by their relatives. Usual pay rate for Otoshidama is \$10 to \$100, and it depends on a person. Adults tend to give more money as Otoshidama to older children than younger ones. Otoshidama is put into a small and colorful envelope and given to each child.

Every New Year's Day, I can get Otoshidama from my parents and grandparents. I have lived separately with my grandparents, but still now they send Otoshidama for me and my sister.

When I was a child, my family sometimes has visited my parents' home country where most of my relatives have lived. At that time, I could get Otoshidama from not only my grandparents but also my uncles, aunts, and other relatives. Also, when my father's friends visited my home during New Year's holidays, they gave me Otoshidama. In fact, the custom of Otoshidama is associated with Kagami Mochi. As mentioned earlier, the God of New Year comes to each home and stays in Kagami Mochi. Then, people in the past expected to receive the life of power of the God through eating Kagami Mochi. When eating Kagami Mochi, a head of a family who was a father or a grandfather gave a piece of Kagami Mochi to each family member (Miura, 2012).

Then, this custom has been changed as passing time, and nowadays money is handed out instead of Mochi from superior to subordinate (Miura, 2012). After enjoying New Year's dishes for celebration, we relax and spend time watching on TV together. For us, the first day of New Year is when spending time with family at home.

#### *Values of New Year's Celebration*

Each people would have a different idea about New Year's celebration in Japan. Some people spend New Year's holidays traveling regardless of Japanese tradition and culture, and other people celebrate New Year's Day in Japanese traditional way. For my mother, Japanese customs of New Year's Day make her prepare herself for starting the year. She also says that she hopes the year would be good one. In fact, she did not know the meanings of New Year's customs, but she has been celebrating every New Year's Day following Japanese traditional ways. That is because she would not feel that New Year started without practicing those customs

of New Year's Day. She wants to perceive and feel starting of New Year through practicing Japanese traditional New Year's customs. Moreover, she follows the traditional way of New Year's celebration every year because that is natural for her. When she began understanding things, she naturally learned the ways of New Year's celebration in her family. Then, the tradition and culture is passed down from her to me this time. She considers that other people would have the similar concept to her in New Year's celebration in that people would preserve our tradition because of not a duty but a common sense.

### *Hatsumode*

“Hatsumode” is one of Japanese New Year's events, and it refers the first visit of a shrine in New Year. “Hatsu” means “first”, and “mode” means “pray”. Therefore, people who visit a shrine for Hatsumode pray to the God for luck of the New Year. Generally, most of people visit a shrine for Hatsumode on January 1, 2, or 3, so any shrines, especially in urban areas, get very crowded during these three days. Also, there are many people who visit a shrine on New Year's Eve and wait for starting New Year in the Shrine in order to celebrate it there. Hatsumode is one of religious services of “Shinto” which is Japanese religion. However, people tend not to realize Hatsumode is a religious service because many Shinto and Buddhism services are treated as Japanese customs. In fact, most of people who go to Hatsumode believe they are irreligionists. My family visits a shrine called “Minatogawa shrine” where we visit every year for Hatsumode. For better luck, Japanese people tend to go to a shrine where Japanese famous God or a historical figure is enshrined. Each shrine enshrines a different God in Japan. Minatogawa shrine is popular in that the famous historical figure is enshrined there, so my family takes 30 to 40 minutes by car to go to Minatogawa shrine even though we have other shrines near our home. We go to

Hatsumode on January 2 or 3 because January 1 is the day for relaxation at home for my family as mentioned earlier. In the shrine, we have to pass through the red and big gate called “Torii”. Torii is a symbol of a shrine and represents sacredness. After passing through Torii, there is an approach to a hall for worship. When I go to Hatsumode, the approach is too crowded to walk smoothly. On the both side of the approach, many stalls of foods, lotteries, and games are set up. My mother says that these stalls are one of motivations for her to go to Hatsumode. The approach is awash with people who try to go to the hall of worship and people who stand in the lines of the stalls. On the right side near the hall of worship, there is a big tank of water for cleansing their hands and mouth. I wash my hands and mouth with my family there before praying. Behind of the hall of worship, there is the main hall where the God is enshrined. In front of the hall of worship, a very large white offertory box is set up. People throw money in the box. After throwing money in, I clap my hands tow times, close my eyes, and make a wish as expecting my hope would come true. My mother wishes for health of her family every year in the hall of worship. After praying, my family draws a paper fortune called “Omikuji”. Omikuji predicts what would happen in the Year for each person. When the prediction is bad, my family attaches the paper of fortune to a tree or other wires in the shrine. If the prediction is good, I put it in my wallet and bring it back. Every trees and wires in the shrine is full of the white papers of Omikuji. The attached paper fortunes in a shrine are fired later so that bad luck would be cleansed. After drawing Omikuji, I buy a charm called “Omamori”. Omamori is sold in a shrine. Omamori is made from paper or wood, and it is covered with cloth. The pattern of Omamori depends on the kind. There are various kinds of Omamori, and each one has different power. For example, I get an Omamori which would help my hope come true. My father gets an Omamori for traffic safety. My sister buys an Omamori for winning, and my mother gets an Omamori for

safety of family. Other people would get Omamori for protection, bringing love, good luck, and other blessings. Thus, people choose one or more Omamori according to their wishes. Some people put Omamori in their wallets, and others attach it on their bags. Omamori should be exchanged in one year because it is said that Omamori would absorb bad luck of the year. Therefore, people buy new Omamori when they go to a shrine for Hatsumode. Moreover, they return their Omamori of last year to a shrine so that the shrine fires the Omamori that absorbed bad luck of the last year. In addition to Omamori, they bring other sacred things they bought in a shrine last year in order to get the shrine to fire them. Hatsumode is the last event of New Year's Day for my family.



*Hatsumode Heisei 26. Note: Copyright Kitano Tenmangu, 2013.*



*Attached paper fortunes on a tree.  
Note: Copyright Ryu-chan, 2012.*

*Omamori. Note: Copyright Omamori navi, 2014.*

### *Conclusion*

This paper provided the process of Japanese New Year's celebration, focusing on some customs which are practiced in my family. Each custom such as the decorations, "Kagami Mochi" and "Shimekazari", and the dishes, "Zoni" and "Osechi" has specific meaning. Moreover, these customs are deeply associated with Japanese religion "Shinto" in that people celebrate New Year to welcome the God of New Year. For example, on New Year's Eve, people clean their houses to welcome the God of New Year to their houses. As mentioned before, Kagami Mochi symbolizes the place where the God would stay, and Osechi is the dish for the God. As Japanese people celebrate starting of New Year, they wish that the year would be good one with luck. Actually, they visit a shrine for Hatsumode to pray to the God as expecting not only that the year would be a good one but also their hopes would come true. While people who try to preserve these customs are decreasing, especially among the families living in urban areas, Japanese traditions and cultures of New Year's Day have been passed down person to person.

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