



JAPAN INFORMATION
AND CULTURE CENTER
在米国日本大使館広報文化センター

TEACHING TUESDAY

OBON

The Obon Festival (お盆) one of Japan's three biggest holidays. It is an annual event celebrating one's ancestors, and usually is observed from the 13th to the 15th day of the 7th month of the year. In the solar calendar, this is in July, but on the lunar calendar, it occurs in August. So Obon is observed in mid-August in many regions of Japan, but it is also observed in mid-July in other regions. It is said that during this time period, the spirits of the dead come back to visit their descendants.

The customs for Obon vary in every region due to differing traditions. Bon odori (盆踊り), or festival dance, is a common tradition for all regions. However, each region has a local dance and music, often specifically pertaining to the message of Obon, or local min'yo (民謡) folk songs. Bon odori is one of the most popular events of the festival, enjoyed by not only the dancers but also the attendees.

There are other popular customs for obon. At the beginning of the festival, a welcoming fire for the souls called a mukaebi (迎え火) is lit. The, on the evening of the last day, an okuribi (送り火) fire is lit to see off the souls of the ancestors. The most famous of these bonfires is the Gozan no Okuribi (五山送り火) or Daimonji (大文字) bonfire in Kyoto near Kinkakuji Temple. On this night, an immense fire is burned into the side of the mountain in the form of the kanji 大, meaning "great." It is accompanied by four other bonfires, each with different kanji.

The ancestors' departure is marked by the toro nagashi (灯籠流し), or the floating of lanterns. Paper lanterns are illuminated and then floated away in rivers, lakes, and seas. The ceremony usually culminates in a fireworks display. Many Obon celebrations also include a huge carnival with rides, games, and summer festival food like watermelon.