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TEACHING TUESDAY

KAMAKURA

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Kamakura, or snow huts, have nothing to do with the famous town of Kamakura, Japan. Rather, they are a typical winter sight in Akita and other northern parts of Japan. Made by carving out a mound of snow, every year hundreds of kamakura and countless miniature kamakura dot the area, especially in Yokote City.

Kamakura were originally created as a way to worship Suijin, the god of water, at “little New Year,” a holiday celebrated on January 15. Inside each mini-kamakura, which sits about 30 centimeters high, candles are placed and the far wall is decorated with coins as an offering to pray for happiness for the family, prosperity in business and an abundant harvest. The candle lights of these snow white kamakura brighten the dark winter nights.

Larger kamakura are often used as gathering places for local residents. Often, people will call out to passersby, inviting them to enter the kamakura and partake in amazake, a sweet, low-alcohol drink made from fermented rice, and grilled mochi rice cakes. Some kamakura are even turned into full-fledged restaurants, with local specialties of nabe, or hot pot.