Astronomy And Japanese Myths Essay, Research Paper

Throughout history different cultures have let astronomy shape their beliefs and customs. One such culture that has traditions rich in astronomy is the Japanese culture. Since I am half Japanese, I thought I would discuss some of the traditions found in Japanese culture. Further, I will explain how these aincient traditions and beliefs are still present in modern day society in Japan. I found some really great websites which I will use to write my essay. The first website focuses primarily on Japanese festivals/traditions and how astronomy plays a part in Japanese festivals/traditions. The “Astrologers Union of Japan” homepage is great, but the whole website is written in Japanese. Astroarts has a great Japanese astronomy page which offers a cornucopia of astronomical info….the links are great too! Please bear with me as I am learning new things too.

I. Orihime, Kengyuu, and Tanabata Orihime, Kengyuu, and Tanabata

Tanabata is a Japanese festival based on the legend of Orihime and Kengyuu. This story uses the stars of Vega and Altair for it’s main characters. The Japanese refer to Vega as Orihime Boshii which means weaving princess star. Kengyuu Boshii means puller of cows star and refers to Altair. The other characters are Orihime Boshii’s father the emperor which is the star centered at the north pole(polaris?), the boatman which refers to the moon, and Kasasagi which are a group of magpies.

The author of the legend begins by telling his readers that Orihime Boshii(Vega) would visit the “river of heaven”(milky way) everyday and weave beautiful fabrics. Her father the emperor loved these fabrics and grew very fond of them. One day, Orihime Boshii became very sad because she had spent all her life up until that day weaving fabrics and had not found the time to fall in love and get married. The emperor loved his daughter and felt sorry for her…he arranged(where the idea of arranged marriage in Japan comes from?) for her to marry Kengyuu(Altair), a prince who lived across the “river of heaven”. As the marriage of Orihime Boshii and Kengyuu blossomed, Orihime Boshii neglected her weaving and this upset and worried her father. The emperor finally decided to separate the couple by means of the “river of heaven”, however, for one day out of the year(7th day of the 7th month) the couple would be allowed to be together. On that day a boatman(the moon) would ferry Orihime Boshii across the river to see her husband Kengyuu…the boatman would only come to ferry Orihime Boshii across the “river of heaven” if she had finished her weaving…id she had not finished her weaving it would rain and the river would be too flooded to cross by boat. The gods took compassion on Orihime Boshii and allowed for a group of Kasasagi(magpies) to fly into the milky way and make a magpie bridge for Orihime Boshii to cross over to the other side and see Kengyuu.

Tanabata, the festival based on this legend is celebrated every year on the 7th day of the 7th month of the Japanese lunar calendar. During this festival people write wishes to the gods on strips of paper, tie these strips of paper to freshly cut bamboo, eat seasonal vegetables, and decorate horse and cow figures made out of straw or water oats. Over the years water purification ceremonies, a marriage between a weaving lady and a water god, and other such ceremonies were added to the tanabata festival celebration.

II. Setsubun Setsubun, Oni Out, Happiness In

Setsubun is a Japanese lunar new year festival to rid the upcoming year of bad spirits. In short, beans are thrown all over the house, on people, on business, and whatever else people want guarded from the destruction of evil spirits. People are then suppossed to eat the beans. Let’s look at how astronomy plays a role in the Setsubun tradition:

1. Setsubun occurs on the day before Risshun(spring).

2. “The setsu of Setsubun (literally “sectional separation”) originally referred to the eve of any of the 24 divisions of the solar year (see The Lunar Calendar in Japan for an explanation of these divisions).”

3. Lunar Calendar in Japan

4. “Setsubun achieved the status of an imperial event and further took on symbolic and ritual significance relative to its association with prospects for a “returning sun”, associated climatic change, renewal of body and mind, expulsion of evil, symbolic rebirth, and preparation for the coming planting season.”

5. “Setsubun generally always precedes the lunar New Year, and in the ancient ideal was often actually referred to as New Years’ Eve. In 2000, solar and lunar cycles coincided enough to make the ideal almost real in that February 4th marked Risshun (Spring Begins), and February 5th was the actual lunar New Year in both China and Japan.”

III. Happy New Year New Year in Japan

[] This is the Jappanese symbol for the term “happy new year”. It is a combination of the chatacters for sun and moon. According to the Japanese…Sun+Moon= new dawn and change…thus happy new year.

1. This character sometimes refers to the planet Venus…Venus is either “Kinsei”(gold star) or “Myou Jyou”(bright dawning star).

2. “Akema\*censored\*e Omedetou Gozaimasu” is the term for happy new year but it literally means: “The year is changing… darkness gives way to light… new life begins… Congratulations!” Why? “In ancient lore (under the lunar calendar), the New Year was seen in relation to change in both the sun and moon as well as the symbolism of their luminance”

3. The Chinese and Japanese calendars are based on a 12 year cycle…this 12 year cycle is “based on positions of Jupiter with its 12 year orbit (and consequent position about the ecliptic”.

IV. Yowatashi Boshii…Japanese Lore Associated with Orion Japanese Lore Associated with Orion

1. Orion is a Yowatashi Boshii star…one of the “passing the night stars” “This phrase was applied to prominent star groups which would appear in the East at sunset and set with the dawning sun (Uchida, 1973).”

2. The first refers to kabuki drama in which a drum(tsuzumi) with heads on both sides is beaten with the fingertips…the drum is in an hourglass shape and is tied with strings…this drum comes from the constellarion orion. “The stars Betelgeuse and Gamma Ori form one end of the drum while the stars Rigel and Kappa Ori form the other. The three belt stars represent the cord that is used to tie the strings snugly in the middle”

3. The Japanese use wooden blocks as part of entertainment and religious ceremonies. Wooden blocks are said to summon various gods. “Japanese have found the “drama” of this simple instrument and its “sound” in Orion as Kanatsuki no Ryowaki Boshi (literally striking both sides stars; Uchida, 1973).”

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This section of the website on orion contains many more legends and things based on the stars of orion, but for lack of space, I will end it here. Please see the website…I am learning most of these things for the first time. I was amazed to learn that the Japanese view orion as many different things whereas in western culture orion is viewed as a singular thing.

I am running out of room so I will end it here. As you can see Japan has an abundance of legends and folklore based upon the stars and astronomy. This website that I found is awesome…it discuses all of the major japanese beliefs, traditions, cultures, and folklore as it relates to astronomy. In this paper I have tried to summarize some of the Japanese legends, festivals, traditions,and folklore based on astronomy, and what I found out is that I will need much more space than this text window offers in order to discuss this topic. I learned a great deal and hope to study this out further and learn a lot more

Bibliography

1. Renshaw, Steve and Ihara, Saori. “Astronomy in Japan”. 10 October 2000-14

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Other sites that I found but did not use(not inbibliographical form).

1.http://www.astroarts.co.jp/index.html

2. http://jin.jcic.or.jp/kidsweb/japan/d/q9.html

3. http://www.nao.ac.jp/