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# HAPPY NAMAHA NEW YEAR

New Year blessings from the Mountain Ogres

Steve Gillick

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30 DEC 2013: A disturbing and sinister moaning is getting louder as it approaches your home. Loud banging is followed by a crash as the entrance

door is flung open and two horrendous figures tramp into your house. They are dressed in coats of straw. Their feet are bound in straw sandals. They carry a small bucket in one hand and a menacing carving knife in the other. They are wearing scary red or blue masks depicting expressions evil, horror and dread. Fangs protrude from their mouths.



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They yell out questions in an accusatory way as they clomp toward the stove or the fireplace. “Are there any cry babies around”? “Are there any naughty kids here”? “Any lazy people neglecting their work”?

The children are either hiding in fear, crying at the shock of seeing these frightening intruders or nervously laughing at the anticipated arrival of the Namahage (pronounced Nom-a-hah-gay) on New Year's Eve, December 31st.

The Namahage trace their beginnings to the 1st Century BC, when Emperor Wu arrived in Japan

from China, along with five evil ogres. Ogres appear in mythology and folklore as large, monster-like creatures that commit atrocities against human beings. In Emperor Wu's case, the ogres descended from their mountain homes to the villages on the Oga Peninsula in northern Japan whereupon they stole crops as well as young women.

The villagers came up with a proposal to which the Ogres agreed. If the Ogres could build a flight of 1000 steps from the village to the top of the mountain in one night, then they would be provided with whatever they wanted. However if the Ogres failed, then they would have to leave forever. The Ogres set to work diligently building the staircase. As they completed the 999th step, one of the villages imitated the call of the rooster and the Ogres, thinking that dawn had arrived and they had failed at their task, fled the village, never to return.

The actual word 'Namahage' refers to heat blisters♦sores that lazy people get from idly sitting around the fire for too long, and the task of the Namahage is to confront the guilty and get them to change their ways before the coming of the New Year. Some believe the Namahage have an agricultural significance, as they bring with them wishes for healthy and abundant crops in the year ahead. Many consider the Namahage to be spirits (kami) or deities and that their appearance on New Year's Eve carries with it, blessings of good health and prosperity for the family.

Today, in villages such as Oga, New Years Eve is an exciting time where part of the tradition of 'new beginnings' includes a visit from 2-3 young men dressed as Namahage. They check with each

household beforehand to ensure that no one in the home is ill, elderly or pregnant, so as not to upset them, and they also receive some advance hints from parents regarding any issues that need to be addressed during the visit.

If a child is not doing their homework or a member of the family is not pulling his/her weight in doing the chores, then the Namahage build this into their frightening talk as they look around the house for anyone who may be hiding. (Think of it as a version of the lyrics "He sees you when you're sleeping/he knows when you're awake/ he knows if you've been bad or good so be good for goodness sake).

And when the Namahage are finished, they sit down with the head of the household to be appeased and re-assured that those who need to change their ways, will do as the Namahage have warned. This discussion includes the hospitality of food and a cup or two of sake.

I was fortunate to visit the town of Oga in Akita Prefecture in the Tohoku Region of Japan in late November. It's a bit out of the way: It took us four hours to get there from the city of Morioka but it was a relaxing journey by train past mountains and forests festooned in colourful autumn leaves. Finally at Oga train station, we hopped on the Namahage Museum bus. We elected to get off early at the small building known as the 10,000 Buddhas of Shinzan, which dates to 1714. Miniature, carved, wooden Jizo statues (representing the Bodhisattva who decided to postpone Buddhahood until all could be saved) cover the walls and ceilings. A place of protection, peace and comfort for troubled souls

From there it was a 20-minute walk down the road

to the Namahage Musuem.

It was a dull, dank, dark, dreary afternoon and it seemed to complement the atmosphere of visiting displays of ogres and ghostly apparitions. But the first order of business was to dress up like a Namahage in straw cloak, shoes and masks (there were very few visitors in the museum so we did not have to fight off any kids who may also have also wanted to dress-up). After the mandatory photos, we entered the exhibit hall filled with Namahage figures representing New Years traditions in the different villages on the Peninsula. The eerie soundtrack whispering 'whoa, whoa' as if it was a weird, whistling, supernatural chant, filled the hall.

I have to admit that as a serious collector and admirer of masks, I was in seventh heaven. During my stay I'm pretty sure that I took a photo of each of the 100+ masks on display. We visited the theatre to watch a performance typical of a Namahage visit on New Years Eve. The Ogres left the stage and headed straight for the kids in the audience, only to be greeted with smiles and giggles, as their parents had told them beforehand what to expect.

After a visit to the nearby shrine on the mountain side we enjoyed a traditional snack of Shinzan Sake (named after the Shrine and the Mountain) and Gohei Mochi (grilled sticky rice that has been coated with a special miso sauce). Afterward we then had the pleasure of meeting with Chiaki Ishikawa, one of the expert mask makers and of course I purchased one of his creations.

Our only disappointment was having to leave to catch the bus back to the train station and then

continue our travels north to the city of Aomori.

The days surrounding New Years represent an occasion for many societies and cultures to toss out the old, say farewell to bad luck, promise to turn a new leaf and strive to attract good karma for the New Year. The frightening ogres of Namahage are part of this enamoured tradition.

I wish all readers a very Namahage New Year filled with health and happiness but also with the wonderment and awe at the world around us and the opportunity to travel, explore and discover the many cultures and traditions that create the global mosaic. Cheers!





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A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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