

A Historical Walk Around Kyoto

Photo by Ryotaro Nakajima



New Year's Day

Ancient Japanese people used to count their age by adding one year every New Year's Day because of the Shinto religion. It is said that the Life God visits people's houses to give away age on New Year's Eve, and if each of their houses is cleaned and also food and sake are placed at an altar, the God gives people new good spirits in return. It is still customary in Japan to clean and decorate houses, and give offerings before New Year's Day. For example, gates are decorated with pine branches as shown in the photo.

Otoshidama

Money is given to children by their parents or relatives as a New Year's gift (*otoshidama*). It is said that *otoshidama* symbolized one of the new good spirits given by the Gods. Originally, in China, a family's chief provider used to give rice cakes to their family and neighbors. This custom was somewhat changed in Japan. Then, this custom of giving children money was reintroduced back to Korea and China. In Japan, ancient people believed that roundish things were conducive to having good spirits, and in order to fulfill their wish for their children's growth with good fortune, they gave their children coins and other roundish gifts instead of rice cakes. For instance, in the Edo period (1603–1867), some doctors gave pills with herbal medications and townspeople gave folding fans (*sensu*). Nowadays, Japanese people do not care about the shape of the money for *otoshidama* as they seem to forget the original meaning of this custom.

Traditional games

In Japan, boys used to fly kites (*takoage*) with their family or friends during the New Year's holidays because strong winds blow during this season. Girls, meanwhile, used to play battledore and shuttlecock (*hanetsuki*) in the Edo period. To play the *hanetsuki* is believed to protect people from epidemics caused by insects because the flying shuttlecock looks like a dragonfly which eats pests. However, today we play such games infrequently.

The 'Miyawakibaisenan', folding fan shop, as described in the photo, has been in business for more than 180 years in Kyoto and keeps many Japanese traditions.

By **Etsuko.M**