

Colette English

Japanese and Nature

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Kibitsu Shrine

Just like many other shrines and temples, the Kibitsu Shrine in Okayama is surrounded by nature. Okayama is considered a pretty rural prefecture in comparison to Osaka or Tokyo, but the shrines and temples you find in those urban cities are also surrounded by nature. The Meji Jingu in Tokyo is surrounded by a huge forest. You can't even tell that you are still in the middle of Tokyo and it gives you a kind of peace you can't usually find in Tokyo. When I visited Osaka I went to see the Shitennoji Temple and was worried I was following the wrong directions, because all I could see in front of me was tall skyscrapers building; not a temple. Once I crossed the street and turned right I could see it and it looked totally out of place in the middle of the city with all of the trees surrounding it. Even in the modern city it had kept its roots to nature, and I feel that this is one of the important aspects of shrines and temples in Japan.

Religion in Japan and in the west differs greatly. In Japan they believe in many gods while in the west people believe in the almighty God. In Shintoism many inanimate objects could hold a god such as a tree, water, or a rock. I feel that is one reason that Shinto shrines are always located near nature. The gods live in the forest and are worshiped at the shrines in the forests. A lot of the so called natural landscape found at such places as shrines and temples are actually coordinated nature that is based on sense of space and aesthetics. It is manipulated nature. Every plant, tree, shrub, rock and moss has been coordinated to look natural in these environments. There is no better example of coordinated nature than with Japanese style gardens. The mountain that we hiked in is natural but in the inside of the actual vicinity of the shrine there was one garden that we looked at and it was obviously coordinated nature. Other examples are the rock gardens you find in temples such as the Ginkakuji. Unlike shrines found in large modern cities, the Kibitsu shrine is located right next to a mountain so it is able to incorporate a lot of natural nature not coordinated nature. Since we went in the middle of winter a lot of the forest was dead with dead leaves on the ground. When you enter into the mountains near Kibitsu shrine it feels like time has change from the outside world. You have time to relax and just enjoy the peace and quiet around you. I also feel that most of the natural landscape tries to represent a deep association between humans and nature.

Because Shintoism believes in the existence many gods that doesn't just mean inanimate objects that I stated before. Shintoism also believes in the existence of gods in animals such as foxes, dogs, and raccoons. The Inari Shrines are Shinto shrines that worship Inari (foxes). You usually see statues of the foxes at the gates to the Inari shrines. The Kibitsu shrine had a pair of Komainu statues that greeted us. Theses statues are dog-lion hybrids. Because many animals are thought of as sacred because they are gods themselves or associated with a god, they are worshipped. In Nara the deer are worshiped because of their association with one of the gods, so they are protected and can be found freely roaming in Nara Park.

The Kibitsu shrine itself is constructed with similar materials of other shrines and have similar markings. The grounds are constructed similar to other Shinto shrines, and at the entrance you have the tori gate and then stairs leading up to the entrance to the shrine. You are supposed to walk through the

tori gate at either side; not the middle, because that is where the gods walk. The roof of the Kibitsu Shrine is made out of bark and I have seen other similar roofs in Osaka at the Sumiyoshi Taisha. These two shrines also have the forked roofs called Chigi.

We visited the Kibitsu Shrine in January when many people visit shrines for the New Year. From what I have learned in class and from first hand experience is that most Japanese people are not religious. At every temple people stop at, there are many things to do. People pray at the entrance of the gate and purify their hands and mouth at the water area. Next they go to the temple and ring the bell, offer some money, and chant some sutras. If the Japanese people are not religious why do they do these things? It is hidden in their consciousness; part of their daily lives. They are just taking it for what it is. It is just something that they do every year so it becomes natural. This is something we observed when we visited the Kibitsu shrine during January.