

SOMETHING WONDERFUL HAPPENED IN MIKAWA

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By

Leslie Luchayco
(Edited by Joy Lee)

Ichigo Ichie, a very wonderful phrase that I learnt during a tea ceremony, that makes me want to use it all the time to explain each and every second of my stay here in Japan.

Exceptionally fascinated about Japanese cultural festivals, I would never want to miss a golden opportunity to see and experience them first hand myself. With a short stay of four weeks, I was lucky enough to see two festivals from nearby towns of Komatsu and Mikawa.

Located in the Ishikawa Prefecture, the town of Mikawa celebrates its Okeri Festival every 22nd and 23rd of May. The highlight of this festival is the pulling of 13 portable shrines called "Daiguruma" through the streets of the town.

Together with my two friends and the Circle of Friends, the teacher of my host father's English language class and of course my host mother, we went to the nearby town of Mikawa last Saturday night.

The journey began at around 5:10 in the afternoon with my friends and I walking towards my host family's house from the train station. On our way we meet Mr. and Mrs. Okayama, my host parents. We passed them on their way to the train station to fetch Mr. Okayama's friends.

We had a simple dinner of buffet style sandwiches. We were very international. There were Japanese, a Russian, an English, an Australian, a Brazilian, a Korean, an American, a Canadian and a Filipino at the table. Too bad that the three of us spoke only English and was trying so hard to find every useful words and sentences we learnt in class just to communicate with the rest of the people at the table. But somehow we ended up listening and trying hard to understand what they were so interestingly discussing. We tried answering every question they asked in Japanese but we still spoke more English and tried to mine our actions than using Japanese.

We understood them when they laughed at our "hai's" (meaning, "yes") but we never had a chance to figure out how good their English was.

We departed the Okayama house in Matto at around 6:45 p.m. with 10 people fitting into two cars. With a little delay and a wrong turn we were able to reach the town of Mikawa around 7:30 p.m.

At the time we arrived in Mikawa, parking spaces were already quite filled up. We speedily walked from the parking space to the street where the Daigurumas were all lined up. Surprisingly my host parents had some acquaintances in that area. Some of them were in charge of one of the Daigurumas. Most of the people in charge of the Daigurumas were sitting on a mat that had been spread out on the floor, having their dinner and specifically, drinking beer. He quickly introduced each and every one of us to them and they tried talking to us. One of them gave us a long hand towel sized cloth with the town's symbol and a few other simple designs on it and another person handed out beer. Joy and I don't drink beer so someone gave us apple juice instead.

A king young man named Shunsuke was our tour guide around town and he spoke English quite fluently. He walked us to the town's Shinto Shrine and prayed for the festival. On our way he told us about the town, the festival and answered a few of our most tricky questions. We also saw the 13 houses that house the Daigurumas, all lined up at the outer right side of the temple. It was huge.

We went into the Kyonen's house to have a quick snack. We sat on tatami mats in the traditional Japanese style until our legs gave up and then sat in a more relaxed way. They placed two large platters of Japanese dishes in front of us, they poured beer and I still requested a juice. Everybody was so interested in this group of foreigners that we had to introduce ourselves one by

one, in Japanese of course. Matt, my American male friend got all the attention, of course. The Japanese children threw a whole lot of questions at him.

After the short chat came the picture taking then "Itadakimasu¹". We were just about to eat, but my host parents were already calling us to go out because the parade of the Daigurumas was about to begin. Well it was indeed a quick, very quick snack. We had just bitten a small portion of our food.

On our way out, there was another photo shoot and someone carrying a lamp to show the way to the Daigurumas hurried us out. One thing we never expected was that we would actually be joining in with a group of men in their traditional Japanese costumes pulling the ropes that were attached on the Daiguruma. It was not only fun but it was full of excitement. It was one of the most wonderful experiences that I ever had. I mean, being actually there to see the festival is one thing but being there to actually experience the festival, even for a short while was like 101% pure excitement flowing through my veins.

Men were pulling the Daigurumas, while kids rode on them hitting the drums and making noises. We joined in for about two to three street lengths and then my host parents called us to watch a street performance called shishimai naginata, in which people perform a dance depicting a swordsman killing a lion. Then a cute little boy was able to perform this dance. And a surprising thing to see was an Englishman involved in this performance too. They were wearing traditional costumes of very long white wigs and carried long swords. The little boy was wearing a bright yellow costume and carried a samurai sword.

One more performance we saw was men carrying musical instruments walking down the streets in their traditional Japanese costumes. They stopped at every house that would offer them presents, such as a case of beer. One of them would hold the whole case and all of them would dance, jumping up and down and chanting their thanks to the family but all I understood was the last two words "biru kudasai". Those young men were already half drunk and already had a sore throat, I assumed. A car already half filled with beer cases was following behind the group of boys.

Sadly we had to leave the town early because our friends had to catch the last train home. On our way out from the busy festival-lighted area, we saw the Daiguruma being pulled to the Shrine and heard the children making noises on the drums.

It was the most memorable moment of my life, experience first hand the festival and it was indeed Ichigo Ichie because there would not be a second time like that with the same people in the same place, meeting together. Without my host parents we might not have had a chance to experience first hand the festival and learn more about its history.

So again I say with joy in my heart, "what a wonderful and unforgettable experience I had".

¹ Itadakimasu is said before eating a meal.