

Before the matches began the colorful *dohyo-iri* (entering ceremony) was performed. The wrestlers come down the aisle wearing the *kesho-mawashi* (ceremonial aprons). They perform a short ritual as they circle the *dohyo* and then they exit. The *yokozuna* (top ranked sumo wrestler) comes down the aisle also and performs his part of the ceremony. The *gyoji* (referees) were some of the most colorful figures at the match. They wear brightly colored kimono patterned after the style of the samurai. Their black court hats of stiffened gauze resembled a traditional Shinto priest's hat. He also carried a butterfly shaped fan. The *gyoji* enter the ring before each match and in a high pitched voice called out the names of the wrestlers (It is customary for the wrestlers to choose a poetic sumo name). When it was time for the wrestlers to begin the *gyoji* gave the signal with his fan.

For the match the wrestlers were naked except for a *mawashi*, a silken loincloth. The *mawashi* is an important part of the equipment. There are many winning tricks that are made by maneuvering the opponent with a grip on his *mawashi*.

After entering the *dohyo*, each competitor goes through a series of symbolic movements. These are to cleanse his mind and his body. He rinses his mouth out with water, a source of purity and wipes his body with a towel. Then they raised



*"Then just when I*

their arms and legs in the air. Each wrestler throws handfuls of salt into the ring to purify it. They finally squat in front of each other in the center of the ring. They glare at each other and engage in a type of psychological warfare. Then just when I expected the fight to begin they just stood up and went back to their corners. After a few minutes, they threw more salt and appeared ready to begin. After more glaring and posturing they stood up again. There was a four-minute time limit for all of this posturing and then the *gyoji* gave the signal for the match to begin. The match was over in an instant as one sumo wrestler pushed the other easily out of the ring.



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I enjoyed watching the spectators as much as I did the matches. The Japanese people are generally a very quiet and reserved people. However, at a sumo tournament they can become quite rowdy and vocal as they cheer for their favorites. When one of the matches ends with an upset; for example, a lower ranked wrestler defeats one of the yokozunas, the spectators will throw their seat cushions toward the ring.

Following the match another ceremony was performed to close the day's events. It had been a great day! I was surprised at how much I had enjoyed myself.

So am I sumo addict? I don't think so. However, I am an avid fan and I appreciate and enjoy this Japanese cultural experience. There are three 15-day tournaments held in Tokyo and three other tournaments held in other Japanese cities each year. We now attend one day of each of the three Tokyo tournaments and often watch other matches on television. I have my favorites and cheer for them. I always love an upset when someone unexpected from the lower ranks beats the yokozuna or actually wins the entire tournament. My feelings about sumo have completely changed since my childhood. I think my father would laugh!

# FLOWERS, WHAT FLOWERS?

It was New Year's Eve in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. My family (myself, my husband, two teenagers and a cat) moved to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil for our first overseas assignment. Our priorities were food, shelter, education, medical, learning Portuguese and navigating the city. We were making very good progress, but as you can imagine with two teenagers, I had to remain focused on the priorities... the minor details of celebrations and the appropriate traditions fell by the wayside.

We were invited to a New Year's Eve party (*véspera de ano novo*). The hostess told us to wear white as everyone would be in white and it was for peace. This was her second year in Rio and she was 'in the know'. I was also asked to bring a dessert. As new arrivals, and wanting to blend in, we followed instructions well.

The night of the party we tried to find a taxi but the beach road was blocked, so all four of us, dressed in white (with the chocolate cake), walked over 5km to the party. Along the way, many locals were selling white flowers. I was very excited as I thought this was part of New Years and the peace celebration. I purchased a bouquet of twelve white gladiolas for the party hostess and we proceeded on to the party.

When we arrived, my family and the chocolate cake were graciously received, but the white flowers were a whole other story. The hostess went on to explain that this was for macumba (a common generic name for all *orixá* religions) and this was a ritual for the sea goddess. I researched the following after the party. In addition to enjoying the New



Year's Eve, some locals are at the beach to celebrate the 'Festa de Iemanjá'. Iemanjá is the Goddess of the Water, the mother of all the gods in the macumba religion of Brazil. She is offered flowers, gifts, perfume and rice that are set into little boats and cast adrift into the sea, or else tossed directly into the water. This is done to propitiate the goddess and curry favour for the year to come, as well as to thank her for past favors. If the flowers are thrown into the water and do not return, you are said to have good luck or fortune for the coming year.

We had a great time at the party: food, ambiance, fireworks and good friends. As we were leaving, I spotted the flowers I bought just laying on a table in the entranceway. So I decided, why not use them as they were intended? So I took the flowers with me. My children and I walked across the sand, stood at the edge of the water and waited for a big wave. We threw the flowers into the water and together yelled "World Peace" while my husband watched on.

Every New Year's Eve, no matter where in the world we are, my family and I think about the white flowers going out to sea and World Peace. It is now our own tradition.

Anon.

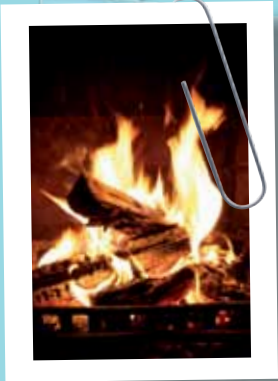
## WOULD YOU COMMIT A CRIME?

After so many moves, you think you know it all; how to organise and prepare for the move. Everything is under control. I learned to trust the packers and I became a bit sloppy with the preparations.

It was on a winter day in Sakhalin and the packers came to pack for our move to Canada. I vividly remember when we packed for Sakhalin four years earlier. What a nightmare that was. Rules have changed now, but we, at that time, had to count every single item in the box. All items had to be weighed and so had the boxes. The total weight of all items needed to match the weight of the box of course, which it never did. So a lot of cheating was necessary. All serial numbers and estimated value of our electronic equipment had to be listed. It was the worst packing ordeal ever.

But now we were moving to alleged civilization, so I was very relaxed about it. The packers were great. They packed everything and I did my thing. Having many last drinks, lunches and goodbye parties with my friends and taking in as much of my beloved island and my Russian friends as possible. I vaguely remembered the packers asking certain questions and answered: "Yes, everything must be packed as long as it is not the furniture belonging to the company". I did not want to end up again with curtains and a lamp that was not ours again (that happened during our second move from Thailand to Malaysia). But the packers knew exactly what I meant, so I did not worry about it.

So when the packing list was finished, I noticed that they packed at least six boxes of firewood. Ah well, plenty of space in the container I thought, and of course firewood will definitely come in handy during cold winter nights in the north of Alberta.



Then three months later we were asked to fly to Edmonton to clear our goods. "What are these boxes with 'wood stuff' written on it?" asked the customs officers. "Oh, yes, that must be the firewood, real good quality birch wood that is"... Oops, come to think of it, where did we read about not being allowed to bring plant material into the country?

"Sorry, we have to incinerate all your wood". We tried hard to hold on to it saying: "No worries, we were going to do that ourselves in our new fire place". But this officer would not give in. Moreover, he wanted to inspect the whole container for other illegal stuff we were bringing in. I feared that all my highly flammable painting material would be confiscated, but that turned out to be o.k. It was the mountain bikes that caused more delay. They could not be too careful... there might still be traces of scary Russian soil contaminated with who knows what, attached to the tires, so they had to go for extensive steam cleaning treatment.

Finally two weeks later our container came. When we saw the bikes, we could not believe they were ours. We bought them second hand in Malaysia and they had never looked that good and shiny! And another surprise awaited us: in one of the boxes labelled 'camping gear' contained not only the BBQ and some pots and pans, but also many more pieces of valuable birch wood! Nature conscious and not wanting to harm nor change Canadian flora, we decided to incinerate the wood immediately in our fireplace. It was mighty cold (-35 degrees centigrade) and boy did we enjoy our illegal fire!

Anon.

# IT'S THE WAY WE DO THINGS AROUND HERE

ANDREW RUDGE



Like worshippers before their chosen god (or goddess), partisans at a rally, workmates at the office and the screaming crowd at a football derby, we share beliefs, behaviours and prejudices that mark our membership of a range of cultural groups. And like gamblers at the poker table we learn to recognise the signals – the subtle or not so subtle ‘tells’ that mark others as cultural partners.

Equally, we learn to recognise those who are different, who don’t belong, who believe, perhaps, the unthinkable. All too often the differences are founded in race, religion and politics; topics that history and literature teach us are more often the foundation of conflict than of harmony. Little wonder then, that the very wise barman at my local hostelry labelled them as subjects that should never be discussed with strangers. So, tempting as it is to aim the odd barb at the more obvious cultural tells, I beg leave to duck down behind the parapet and to offer some non-controversial cultural markers that are often ignored, but have the potential to furnish valuable insights into the cultures from which they spring.

With the exception of the wars between the ‘Little-Endians’ and the ‘Big-Endians’, brought so effectively to a conclusion by our travelling friend Gulliver, I’m hard pushed to think of serious conflict brought about solely by items in the everyday larder. Foodstuffs mark distinctions between cultures and various items have been symbols for bloody, politically motivated conflict; but not the cause of such conflict. And foodstuffs speak volumes to those prepared to thrust a questing ear into the supermarket trolley. Take the not so humble biscuit. No, don’t go, bear with me on this. There’s nothing particularly controversial about them, they come in a variety of shapes, sizes, styles and tastes, they mark distinctions between cultures and yet they

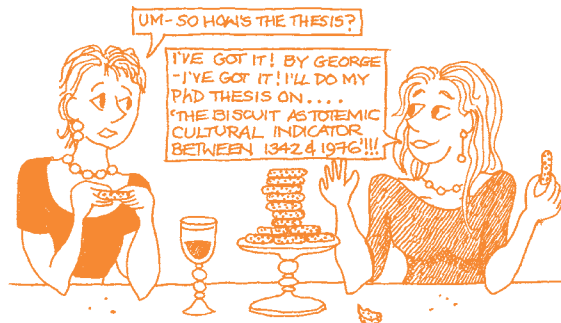
rarely (the nursery excluded) cause the shedding of blood.

If you're a Brit you're familiar with offerings that speak of sobriety, delicacy and the calm superiority that stems from days of Empire. Rich Tea, Digestive, Custard Cream, Ginger Nuts; close your eyes and you're there on a colonial veranda taking tea with Lord Thingummy and Lady Whatsit, musing politely on the state and fate of nations. It's physically impossible to be anything other than cool and refined in the presence of a good British biscuit.

If you're French, coffee time is likely only to be sullied with the frivolity of biscuits behind closed doors. The public face of the biscuit smiles down on *les enfants* while Maman and Papa strike a pose that says 'we are health conscious, but child indulgent.' The imprints, packaging and names on popular biscuits leave no doubt as to the target audience: 'Petit ecolier', 'Petit beurrré', 'Petit lait', to name but a few, and guilt is writ large on the faces of childless adults who pluck the odd packet from the supermarket shelf.

Meanwhile, the Dutch overcome conflicts twixt Calvinism and self-indulgence through a mix of the practical and the festive. The syrupy favourites, *Stroopwafels*, serve both to save electricity by keeping the coffee warm and to provide the energy boost needed to finish the morning's tasks. *Speculaas*, those crisp, spiced offerings that speak of the Indies used to only venture forth for *Sinterklaas*, who provided a welcome excuse for a little taste bud tingling in the depths of winter. Times change and a range of spicy offerings can now be had throughout the year, although the strict coffee-and-one-biscuit legislation ensures moderation.

In a not untypical show of rebellion that probably started at teatime, in Boston, our American cousins eschew the noble biscuit in favour of something called a 'cookie'.



This upstart confection comes in countless shapes and sizes and seems to include every flavour imaginable, but with a clear focus on chocolate: chipped, flavoured, coated or all three. Despite the array of readily available riches, however, like naughty children spurred on by the last vestige of the pioneering spirit, many Americans reach for more, let's say, do-it yourself varieties; like the infamous 'S'more'. The recipe is simple: take a cinnamon-flavoured Gr'am cookie as a base; cover it in melted marshmallow, add a large chunk of Hershey chocolate and top-off with another Gr'am cookie. If that doesn't blow your carefully calorie-controlled diet you could add another layer of marshmallow before the final Gr'am. It screams 'independence' and 'indulgence' and is as American as, well, as apple pie, which isn't, and it isn't at all my cup of tea...

And that itself could open a whole new field of cultural study. Ah, the Brits and their devotion to a brewing and drinking ritual that rivals that of the Japanese or the Europeans with their leaning toward the slice of lemon; the millions who hold the bean in higher regard than the leaf; the rise and fall of caffeine-driven nations; tea and coffee as the pivotal ingredients in business decisions... the possibilities are almost endless. There's a PhD thesis in there at the very least, maybe a Nescafe bursary or even a Nobel.