Contemporary popular beliefs in Japan

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Lára Ósk Hafbergsdóttir

September 2010
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Abstract

This thesis discusses contemporary popular beliefs in Japan. It asks the questions what superstitions are generally known to Japanese people and if they have any affects on their behavior and daily lives. The thesis is divided into four main chapters. The introduction examines what is normally considered to be superstitious beliefs as well as Japanese superstition in general. The second chapter handles the methodology of the survey written and distributed by the author. Third chapter is on the background research and analysis which is divided into smaller chapters each covering different categories of superstitions that can be found in Japan. Superstitions related to childhood, death and funerals, lucky charms like omamori and maneki neko and various lucky days and years especially yakudoshi and hinoeuma are closely examined. The fourth and last chapter contains the conclusion and discussion which covers briefly the results of the survey and what other things might be of interest to investigate further.
# Table of contents

1. Introduction .............................................................................................................. 3  
  1.1 What is superstition? ................................................................................................. 4  
2. Research Method ........................................................................................................ 10  
  2.1 Execution of the Survey ............................................................................................ 10  
  2.2 Participants ............................................................................................................... 10  
3. Background Research and Analysis ............................................................................. 12  
  3.1 Childhood superstitions ........................................................................................... 13  
  3.2 Death and funerals .................................................................................................. 15  
  3.3 Lucky charms ........................................................................................................... 17  
    3.3.1 Omamori (お守り) ............................................................................................... 18  
    3.3.2 Maneki Neko (招き猫) ..................................................................................... 19  
  3.4 Lucky days and years .............................................................................................. 20  
    3.4.1 Yakudoshi (厄年) ............................................................................................. 21  
    3.4.2 Hinoeuma (丙午) ............................................................................................. 22  
4. Discussion and Conclusion .......................................................................................... 24  
Bibliography .................................................................................................................... 26  
Appendix 1 ...................................................................................................................... 29  
Appendix 2 ...................................................................................................................... 33
1. Introduction

Men would never be superstitious, if they could govern all their circumstances by set rules, or if they were always favoured by fortune: but being frequently driven into straits where rules are useless, and being often kept fluctuating pitiably between hope and fear by the uncertainty of fortune’s greedily coveted favours, they are consequently for the most part, very prone to credulity.¹

These are the words of Spinoza and he was right in as much as of our lives being full of unpredictability and uncertainty. Some people seem to crave it and take chances everywhere they can. Others fear it so much that it can lead to depression and substance abuse. Most of us fall somewhere in between those two extremes. We try to avoid taking risks but deal with the situation if we have to. Quite a few people do not show any signs of this uncertainty affecting them whereas others seek out religion to help them deal with these things. Others respond with superstitious belief or action, even though everything tells them that it cannot affect the event that awaits them.²

Many superstitions have religion as their basis, others old stories and legends. Some of them become obsolete and we stop believing in them. Others evolve and change to keep up with the changing of time. People vary in their degree of superstition but most of us can admit to doing something that is considered superstitious in one way or another. Most western people think to themselves that Friday the 13th brings bad luck but no one can really explain why. The real historical significance of most superstitions has been forgotten. We often ignore everything that tells us that superstitions do not mean anything and use minor evidences and coincidences to hype things up. If more people than usual are admitted into hospital on Friday the 13th it is blamed on this particular day. If not, it just isn’t mentioned.

New technology can also bring out new superstitions. When the microwave first came on the market many believed that if you were to look in to the microwave while turned on you could get hit by the microwaves and you could lose your eyesight. This was brought on by fear of this new technology that people perhaps did not fully understand. Recently there has been a debate about cell phones causing cancer and many say that this is a superstition which

¹ Benedict de Spinoza. 2008, p.13
² Stuart A. Vyse. 1997, p.5
might be true but we will not know for sure until it has been scientifically researched to the fullest.

It is difficult to say how widespread superstitious beliefs are. What one person might consider as religion or an old habit others might think of as superstitions. Many people do not like admitting that they are superstitious as superstition is often looked upon as a sign of stupidity and ignorance and some people believe superstitions are all just old wives’ tales. Even so, many people do things that can be considered superstitious. They perform rituals and do things to prevent bad luck, just in case.

The same or similar superstitions can exist in many different countries. The stories travel and adapt to new places. Many Japanese people believe black cats to be a bad omen and that Friday the 13th is unlucky, just like in Iceland and many other countries. Some of the superstitions I chose to investigate further I had never heard of before, although that does not necessarily mean that they are all of Japanese origin. When writing the essay I researched many Icelandic superstitions as well. Doing so I came across many rituals and doings associated with superstitions that I had been performing over the years without realizing it was called superstition. Many of the Icelandic superstitions I read about were old and some were completely unfamiliar to me. That is also the reason why I wanted to see if the Japanese superstitions I had read and heard about were actually something young people in Japan were aware of.

1.1 What is superstition?

The Icelandic book on superstitions “Sjö, Níu, Þrettán”3 contains an excellent example of how a superstition can come into being. It is the birthday of the daughter of a handball player. She has baked a cake and the handball player eats a piece before going to compete in a difficult match. He excels in the game. The next time he is going to compete in a difficult match his daughter has again baked the same cake. He has a bite and again plays extremely well. After that he starts thinking that the cake has some magical power and every time before a difficult match he will eat the cake. His team ends up winning the tournament.4

The reason why some superstitions seem to work can be explained with the placebo effect. Merely from believing that the cake helped him, the handball player might have had more confidence and been less anxious before the games and therefore played much better.

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3 “Seven, Nine, Thirteen”
4 Símon Jón Jóhannsson. 1993, p.7
Then again, if the handball player had not played well after eating the cake and this had occurred consistently the ritual had most likely been abandoned.\textsuperscript{5}

Superstition is not easy to define. Some scholars distinguish between superstition and folk belief while others think of it as one and the same thing. The folklorist Alan Dundes has argued that we need to have a special definition of what exactly superstition is because while no standard definition exists each person is free to call whatever they like a superstition.\textsuperscript{6} Many philosophers, psychologists, folklorists and others have come up with their own definitions and explanations about superstitions but few of them agree and it is impossible to say if anyone is correct. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary states that the word ‘superstition’ can be traced back to 13\textsuperscript{th} century and it describes superstition as follows:

1. a) A belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or false conception of causation.

b) An irrational abject attitude of mind toward the supernatural, nature, or God resulting from superstition.

2. A notion maintained despite evidence to the contrary.\textsuperscript{7}

Usually the definitions of superstition in dictionaries and encyclopedias are fairly negative and give people the impression that if they are superstitious they are also ignorant, irrational and stupid. This evokes the question of whether there is there a real difference between religion and superstition. As mentioned earlier some people turn to religion and others to superstition when trying to cope with the uncertainty of life. On the data information service About.com you can find the definition of Austin Cline which states that religion and superstition are very similar: “…both superstition and traditional religions are non-materialistic in nature. They do not conceive of the world as a place controlled by sequences of cause and effect between matter and energy. Instead, they presume the added presence of immaterial forces which influence or control the course of our lives”\textsuperscript{8} Another thing mentioned earlier is that many superstitions seem to have religion as their basis. Some say that the superstition of knocking on wood, after tempting faith with a presumptive statement of an outcome that has yet not been decided, can be traced back to Christianity; the knocking on wood reminds people of Christ’s cross and by doing that people are showing Christian submission.\textsuperscript{9} Christians, especially Catholics, have many symbols for defense, the cross, the holy water and some prayers have protective values, many people hang up a sign in their

\textsuperscript{5} Ernest Cashmore. 2002, p.254
\textsuperscript{6} Alan Dundes. 1961, p.25
\textsuperscript{8} Austin Cline. http://atheism.about.com/od/religionnonreligion/a/superstition.htm
\textsuperscript{9} Símon Jón Jóhannsson. http://visindavefur.is/?id=6384
homes saying: “God Bless Our Home” as to protect their home and so forth. This indicates an obvious connection between religion and superstition.

Japanese religious traditions are different from most countries. People often joke and say Japanese people are born Shinto, married Christian and die Buddhist. Shinto and Buddhism coexist quite happily, along with a smattering of Christian holidays. Some Japanese families even have both Buddhist and Shinto family altar in their home without that bringing about any conflicts. Japanese people usually do not consider themselves as being extremely religious. However, in the 1970s shukyo nenkan, which is Japan’s religious yearbook, the number of followers of various religions in Japan outnumbered the total national population and judging by the amount of religious groups, temples and shrines existing in Japan and the number of people visiting these religious places one would think Japanese people were extremely religious. The reason could be that Japanese people participate in things considered religious out of tradition. They were brought up going to a shrine or a temple during New Year, for example, and keep doing it without feeling a particular connection to religion by doing so.

Four major religious traditions exist in Japan and they are Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity and Shinto. Shinto is belief in kami (神) which are an endless numbers of gods or sacred spirits that can take any shape and can be found anywhere. They can inhabit a tree, cave, rock or an island even. A strange animal might also carry a kami and anything that is mysterious or inspires awe can be a kami and must be treated as one. This is somewhat similar to old Icelandic beliefs where belief in nature and things connected with nature, like elves, fairies and trolls, has always been strong and living in peace with the nature was very important. In Iceland however, this is usually termed as folk belief and not religion. This shows that one man’s religion can easily be another man’s superstition.

In an effort to define superstition some say we need to investigate the different kinds of superstitions that exist. The folklorists Newbell Niles Puckett and Alan Dundes have both devised a system of how to categorize superstitions. Puckett divides superstition into two main categories that he calls control signs and prophetic signs. Control signs can be described as: “If you (or someone else) behave in such and such a manner, so and so will happen” and prophetic signs: “If something (outside of your control) behaves in such and such a manner, so and so will result”. Alan Dundes divides superstition to three main categorizes; signs, magic and conversions. Signs are purely accidental or coincidental. They are unavoidable and

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11 Professor Solomon. 1997, p.14
12 Newbell Niles Puckett. 2003, p.313
non causal. Like when a black cat crosses your path, there is nothing you can do to avoid that happening. Magic is intentional and not accidental. It is avoidable and causal. People can affect magic by doing something that is considered to be good or bad. If you see a ladder leaning against a wall you can choose not to walk under it and therefore prevent bad luck. Conversion is when sign is converted in to magic. If you see a shooting star you have to make a wish if you want it to become true so for this superstition man’s activity is required.\(^\text{13}\)

For the purpose of this thesis superstition shall be defined as the belief that the outcome of a situation depend upon something outside the individual, that lucky charms or specific behavior can have a greater affect on the situational outcome than the persons’ own actions. This would include religion where people believe that their god determines the course of their lives. Moreover, when people believe that lucky charms will help them and that astrology can determine personality or what days are more fortuitous than others for various endeavors.

The superstitions used in this thesis are divided into four categorizes based on their content; childhood superstitions, death and funerals, lucky charms and finally lucky days and years.

1.2 Japanese superstition

Japan has many superstitions concerning a variety of things. There is an abundance of superstitions linked to festivals, funerals and weddings as well as the rituals surrounding these events. Lucky charms are purchased for all kinds of occasions to protect and help people in everyday life and belief in astrology and unlucky days and years in people’s lives, where people should avoid doing certain things, is still strong. Following are few Japanese superstitions worth mentioning to deepen the understanding of how Japanese people think and act, although questions concerning these superstitions were not used in the survey.

A relatively recent idea in Japan is how some people think of blood types as being similar to astrological signs. They believe that a persons’ blood type can reveal various things about their personality. Almost everyone in Japan knows their own blood type, just like westerners generally know their own astrological sign, and people often use it as a conversation starter. There is even an industry surrounding this belief so you can buy a blood type chewing gum, soft drink or even condoms, although it is not clear for what purpose or why different blood types would need different kind of products, this is probably only

\^13\text{Dundes. 1961, pp. 30-32}
produced for fun. Every blood type possesses different characteristics. A person who has blood type A is, among other things, calm, patient and stubborn, type B is creative, unpredictable and individualist, type O is independent and ambitious and finally people having type AB are thought of as rational and indecisive.\(^{14}\)

Homophones also play a very important role in Japanese superstition. The number four for instance is considered inauspicious because it can be pronounced the same way as the word for death - *shi*. Japanese people take care to avoid making presents that contain four pieces. It is similar to the number thirteen in western countries. Some hotels and hospitals even avoid having room number four. Other numbers are avoided due to different homophones, for instance in maternity sections of hospitals the number 43 tends to be avoided because the pronunciation of the number can mean stillbirth.\(^{15}\)

During weddings it is popular to serve certain foods the names of which sound like happiness. For example *tai* (sea bream), derived from the word *medetai* which means happy, and *kobu* (sea kelp), derived from the word *yorokobu* which also means to be happy or glad.\(^{16}\) These dishes, among many more, are also eaten at the New Year celebration in Japan. *Shogatsu* (正月), meaning New Year, is probably the biggest holiday held in Japan. The selection of food eaten around New Year is called *osechi ryori* and each dish has a special meaning, such as for good health, good harvest, fertility and more. One of the things eaten is *Kazunoko* (herring roe) and since *kazu* means number and *ko* means child it is believed that by eating that you will be gifted with many children. *Kuromame* (black soybeans) is another dish served and since the word *mame* in Japanese can mean both health and hard work, people believe that by eating them at New Year they can continue working in good health in the coming year.\(^{17}\) Special decorations are made for the New Year all of which have a special meaning. One of these decoration is *shimenawa*. It consists of a special twisted straw rope with white paper, folded in specific way, called *shide* hung on it. It is usually put on the door around new year to ward off evil spirits. This is a Shinto tradition and can be seen all year around in shinto shrines. It is used to mark the sacred space and chase away evil spirits. Another decoration is *kadomatsu* which is made of pine branches, bamboo and twigs tied together with a straw rope. The pine tree being evergreen is a symbol of longevity and the bamboo because of its nature is a symbol of strenght and constancy. One is planted on either side of the front gate or the door of the house and are considered to be a temporary housing of


\(^{15}\) Gil Asakawa. 2004, p.39

\(^{16}\) Setsuko Yoshizuka. http://japanesefood.about.com/cs/holidays/a/weddingfood.htm

\(^{17}\) Elisabeth Kiritani and Itsuo Kiritani. 1995, p.152
Kadomatsu are often decorated with things considered auspicious like folded paper crane which is a symbol of longevity and more recently has also become a symbol of peace. Moreover, according to an old legend a crane is believed to live for 1000 years and if a person manages to fold 1000 paper cranes he or she will be granted a wish by the gods.\(^{19}\)

In chapter three childhood superstitions, superstitions related to funeral and death, lucky charms like omamori and maneki neko as well as lucky days and years such as yakudoshi and hinoeuma will be examined in depth. The question posed is “are these superstitions known to Japanese people” and if so “do they have any influence on their behaviour and daily lifes”?\(^{18}\)

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2. Research Method

The research material was obtained through an online survey composed by the author. It was made up of 20 questions and queried what superstitions are currently known in Japan and also if and how superstition affects people’s everyday life and behavior in Japan.

To begin with people were asked about their gender, age, place of birth as well as if they thought of themselves as superstitious. Then they were asked if they had heard about a certain superstition before and/or asked how they felt about it, and whether they would feel bad if they were to act against it. Note that in the following chart columns where the answer possibility is ‘No’, the survey sometimes had the answer option; ‘No/I don’t believe in it/it does not matter to me’, where appropriate. The whole survey can be read in Japanese in appendix A and in English in appendix B.

2.1 Execution of the Survey

The survey was designed on the interactive website www.kwiksurveys.com and the link to the survey sent to Japanese people through www.facebook.com and in e-mail. The survey was sent out in Japanese to prevent any language confusion. It was made available online on July 20th 2010 and removed August 5th 2010. Participants were informed of my name and that I was a student of Japanese Language and Society at the University of Iceland, graduating in fall of 2010. Participants were informed of the fact that the survey was anonymous, the answers given could not be traced back to them and that their name would not appear anywhere in the thesis. They were also advised that if they had any questions concerning the survey or the essay they were welcome to contact me. The program Microsoft Excel was used for processing the data.

2.2 Participants

By August 5th 50 people had taken the survey. The link to which was distributed online, sent out to Japanese friends and others utilizing the social networking site www.facebook.com as well as e-mail and they then asked to pass the survey on to others. The gender distribution of the participants ended up being 68% female and 32% male. According to a survey of internet usage trends in Japan done in 2005 males accounted for 61,9% of internet users in Japan and
females for 59.9%. Since this data indicates that the number of female and male internet users in Japan is almost equal it does not explain the difference between female and male responses to this survey. The most probable reason is that more Japanese females than males received the survey since I have more social networking ties with females in Japan than males. However the subject of the survey could also have been an influencing factor along with trends indicating that females are more likely to respond to surveys than males.

As can be seen in figure 1 the age distribution of the respondents ranged from 16-50 year old, with most participants being in the age bracket 21-25 years old, or 68%.

![Age group division](image)

Figure 1

Figure 2 shows that over half of the participants, 52%, came from Kanto region, which includes Tokyo. Otherwise all regions are represented in the data apart from Shikoku.

![Birth place](image)

Figure 2

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3. Background Research and Analysis

Most western people have heard about Friday the 13th being unlucky and that seeing a black cat is a bad omen. Armed with the knowledge of western superstitions it is therefore interesting to take a look at the superstitions of Asia. Most of the superstitious beliefs that exist in Asia people in the West have never heard of before and find very different from the ones they know. The reason for this difference is most likely caused by many distinct reasons such as the different languages, religions and customs practiced in these countries that inevitably leads to people thinking differently about things. For this survey it was extremely difficult to narrow down and decide what superstitions to inquire about. I decided to choose superstitions that differed most from the Icelandic ones known to me, and that I thought would be the most interesting to investigate further and learn more about. The table below contains all the questions from the survey and the answers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you consider yourself as superstitious?</td>
<td>Y 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever heard that if you whistle at night snakes (robbers) will come to your house?</td>
<td>Y 75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you or would you feel bad if you whistled at night?</td>
<td>Y 29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever heard that if you lie down shortly after eating you will turn into a cow?</td>
<td>Y 94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you or would you feel bad if you lie down shortly after eating?</td>
<td>Y 70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever heard that it is a bad omen sleeping with your pillow facing north?</td>
<td>Y 96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you make sure that you pillow does not face north?</td>
<td>Y 52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever heard that if a hearse drives by you should hide your thumb or your parents will die?</td>
<td>Y 79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you hide your thumb when a hearse drives by?</td>
<td>Y 19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you stick your chopsticks upright in bowl rice?</td>
<td>Y 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever heard that if you take a picture of 3 people the person in the middle will die a sudden death?</td>
<td>Y 28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If there is a picture taken of you with two other people do you make sure that you are not in the middle?</td>
<td>Y 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you had a shop would you have maneki neko there?</td>
<td>Y 23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have omamori?</td>
<td>Y 72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it important to burn omamori in a shrine?</td>
<td>Y 62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think it is important to get a blessing on yakudoshi?</td>
<td>Y 55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you feel uncomfortable having a daughter in the year of Hinoeuma?</td>
<td>Y 13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Y=Yes   N=No   S=Sometimes   M=Maybe

Table 1: Survey questions and answers
The first question of the survey asked if people considered themselves as superstitious. As superstition is often looked down on I thought the answer to this question would be a good indicator of what Japanese people thought of superstition.

**Do you consider yourself as superstitious?**

![Figure 3](image)

Figure 3 shows that when asked if participants considered themselves to be superstitious 20% admitted to being superstitious, 60% admitted being sometimes superstitious and 20% said they were not superstitious at all. These numbers were not surprising since most of us can admit to doing something superstitious every now and then, whether we do it on purpose or not.

The rest of the results will be more closely examined in the following chapters and facts and history surrounding these superstitious beliefs will also be reviewed.

### 3.1 Childhood superstitions

Most of us can recall some silly superstition that we believed in when we were young. A few of which stick with us and we would still think twice before going against. Some of these superstitions we heard from friends, some sprout from our own imagination and others came from our parents who either wanted to teach us good behavior and protect us or simply learned it from their parents. I was for instance told when I was young that if I rolled down a hill my intestines would get all tangled up. It didn’t stop me from doing it but if I started feeling too dizzy it made me stop and think about it. Today I know that the reason they told me this was so I wouldn’t get sick and throw up. I was also informed that if I grimaced too often my face would eventually get stuck like that and that if I sat too close to the TV my eyes
would become square. Every time I did either of those things I went straight to the mirror to check if everything was as it should be. I found two similar examples of this in Japan. First of all children are told not to whistle at night because if they do a burglar will come into the house. This is most likely told in order to make children stop making noises so they won’t bother others. The other thing is that if you lie down immediately after eating you will turn into a cow and I can imagine this is told in order to prevent children from becoming lazy.

**Do you feel bad if you whistle at night?**

![Bar Chart](image1)

- **58%** No
- **29%** Yes
- **13%** Sometimes

**Figure 4**

Of the respondents 75% said they had heard that if you whistle at night a snake/robber will come to your house. Figure 4 shows that 29% said they did feel bad, 13% said they sometimes felt bad and 58% said they did not feel bad at all when asked if they felt bad whistling at night. According to these statistics this seems to affect 42% of participants at least once in a while.

**Do you feel bad if you lie down shortly after eating?**

![Bar Chart](image2)

- **70%** No
- **13%** Yes
- **17%** Sometimes

**Figure 5**

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22 Gwladys Hughes Simon. 1952, p.284
The more widespread childhood superstition, with 94% having heard of it, was that you would turn into a cow if you lay down shortly after eating. As shown in figure 5 a larger number of people also seemed to take this superstition more seriously, with 70% saying they felt bad if they lay down shortly after eating, 17% that they sometimes felt bad but only 13% saying they did not experience any discomfort.

3.2 Death and funerals

Japanese culture possesses a plentitude of superstitions linked to death and the dead. In Shinto purity is extremely important and there are a multitude of taboos concerning death and flowing blood. A person that has recently lost a family member and women during their menstrual period, for example, should not go to a shrine for a fear of passing the pollution to the kami.²³

Most funerals performed in Japan are Buddhist. In this chapter I will discuss two beliefs that can be linked to funerals, and therefore Buddhist rituals, and two that are linked to death.

In Japan when people die their body is placed with the head toward north. Because of this people are told not to sleep with their head facing north, probably because of fear they might die in their sleep.²⁴ Of the participants 96% had heard that sleeping with your pillow facing north is a bad omen, which makes it one of the most pervasively known superstitions of those questioned in the survey.

**Do you make sure that your pillow does not face north?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>37%</th>
<th>52%</th>
<th>11%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6

²⁴ De Garis et al., 2002, p.30
As seen in figure 6, the number of participants that regularly make sure that their pillow does not face north is 52%, 11% sometimes make sure of it and 37% say they do not think about it.

In Japan you should never do things that mimic the rituals performed at funerals, for example, one should never stick their chopsticks into a bowl of rice as that is one of the rituals performed at a funeral and is also done when offering food to the spirits of the dead on a Buddhist altar. Eating the rice after sticking the chopsticks in them would be akin to stealing food from the dead. When participants were asked if they would stick their chopsticks upright in their rice 98% said they never did, with only 2% saying they sometimes did. It is hard to say if this is a learnt custom or habit acquired from parents or others or whether people don’t like to do it because they actually believe that if they do something bad will happen to them. Another example of things you shouldn’t do is that you should never pass food from chopstick to chopstick because after cremation the remaining bones in the ash are ritually passed with chopsticks between family members when placing the ash in the urn. It has however been pointed out to me that passing food with chopsticks is really hard, even for a Japanese person, so maybe the reason people do not do it is not necessarily because of superstition.

Another belief is that when a hearse drives by you should hide your thumb, otherwise your parents will die or some say that you will not be with your parents when they die. The name for the thumb in Japanese is oya yubi which translates to parent finger. I believe that this superstition could also have fallen into the category of childhood superstition because it sounds like something that children rather than adults would do. Of the participants 79% had heard of this superstition.

Do you hide your thumb when a hearse drives by?

![Figure 7](image-url)

Figure 7

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25 De Garis et al., 2002, p.292
When asked if participants would hide their thumb when a hearse drove by 19% said they would, 23% said they sometimes did but the majority, 57%, said they did not hide their thumb, seen in figure 7.

The least known superstition of all in the survey was that if you take a photograph of three people the person in the middle will supposedly die a sudden death. Only 28% of participants had heard about this superstition and only 2% said that they made sure they were not in the middle if a picture was being taken. This came as a surprise since according to a survey conducted in June 2007 where people were asked to write down what superstitions they felt might be true 75.2% of participants wrote this belief down. This could mean that people might recognize this superstition and joke around with it but not necessarily take it seriously. References as to how old this superstition is are hard to come by and therefore it is difficult to say what might have brought the superstition on. The belief is mentioned in an article by Gwladys Hughes Simon from 1952 but nothing is said of the origin of it there. It has been said that when people first saw a camera they were afraid of them. Some thought that having a picture taken would mean bad luck and some even thought that the camera could steal their soul. This superstition, if that old, might have derived from this fear and is slowly fading out. It could also be an urban legend that was popular few years back but has lost its ‘power’ now.

3.3 Lucky charms

A lucky charm is a thing you carry around with you and you believe will bring good luck. Theoretically anything can be used as a lucky charm. Most lucky charms in Japan are purchased but they can also be something homemade. Sometimes the power of Japanese amulets is associated with homophones. The word for frog sounds the same as to return, kaeru. Therefore amulets that look like frogs are used by people when they go travel so they will return home safely, some even keep them in their purses so that money spent will return. One of the lucky charms that have recently emerged is a Kit Kat chocolate bar. The pronunciation in Japanese for Kit Kat is kitto katto which sounds very similar to kitto katsu which means: “You will surely win”. Therefore parents will often buy this for their children when they have exams in order for them to excel. 

26 “Nantonaku Shinjichyatetteita Toshi Dentsetsu Rankingu”. http://cache001.ranking.goo.ne.jp/crnk/ranking/999/city_legend/
27 Simon. 1952, p.291
28 Inge Maria Daniels. 2003, p.624
There are number of different types of charms in Japan, however the most visible ones to a foreigners eye would be *omamori* and *maneki neko*.

### 3.3.1 Omamori (お守り)

The *mamori* (守り) part of the word *omamori* (お守り) literally means ‘protection’ or ‘defense’. *Omamori* is most often a little piece of paper or wood that has prayer or some text written on them. They are usually kept in a silk pouch and people carry them on themselves or keep them in places where they belong, e.g. if it’s an *omamori* for travel safety it should be hung in the car. They are normally sold at religious sites and are equally to be found at Shinto shrines as well as Buddhist temples, but can also be found in shops. Some of the *omamori* found in shops have been taken to priests for rites and prayers, but not all. Even so they are still considered to be *omamori*. These *omamori* are sold for all kinds of different purposes. The seven most common *omamori* made are:

- **Kotsu anzen** (交通安全) for traffic safety
- **Yaku yoke** (厄除け) to ward off evil
- **Kaiun** (開運) for better fortune
- **Gakugyo joju** (学業成就) for education and passing exams
- **Shobai hanjo** (商売繁盛) for prosperity in business
- **Musubi** (縁結び) for luck in love or marriage
- **Anzan** (安産) for an easy childbirth

If you want, or think you need a different kind of *omamori* you also have the option of going to a priest in a shrine or temple and ask him to make you one, for instance to protect you from bad dreams or other things you are afraid of or trouble you.

Although *omamori* does not expire it is very common to take your *omamori* to a shrine or a temple at the end of the year and burn it. That way you get rid of bad luck from last year and start the New Year with a clean slate.

It seems that carrying *omamori* is still extremely popular since 72% of the participants said they regularly carried an *omamori* and 62% said that it was important to go to a shrine to burn it.

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31 Swanger. 1981, p.239
3.3.2 Maneki Neko (招き猫)

Maneki neko (招き猫) or the beckoning cat is a statue of a cat, normally made of ceramic or porcelain, which has its paw raised up in a Japanese beckoning manner, showing its palm. They come in all sizes and colors but most often they are tricolored with wide eyes. They usually have their left paw raised but can also be found with their right paw raised. It is said that if the left paw is raised it is to invite customers into the store but the right paw raised is to bring in good fortune. The higher the paw is raised the greater the fortune or more the flow of customers. Scholars agree that there are many different stories that exist of the origin of maneki neko and no way to tell if any of them are true. It seems that it came to exist in the latter half of the Edo period (1603-1867) but began getting popular in the Meiji period (1868-1912). 32

If you had a shop would you have maneki neko there?

![Bar chart showing the preferences of participants regarding whether they would have a maneki neko in their shop. 38% said yes, 38% said maybe, and 23% said no.]

Figure 8

Figure 8 shows that 23% of the participants said that if they had a shop they would have a maneki neko. 38% said they would maybe have maneki neko and 38% said they would not have maneki neko in their shop. Since it is perceived as one of the most famous lucky charms in Japan one might expect more people wanting to have maneki neko in their shop. This might be due to the fact that maneki neko is mainly a cultural export found only in shops and not homes, and therefore it is not really personal. Also, young people might find this an old superstition and maybe a new and fresh one will arrive instead or this superstition might be fading out.

32 Sandra Choron, Harry Choron and Arden Moore. 2007, p. 20
3.4 Lucky days and years

The Japanese calendar possesses a number of differing days associated with luck, with some being lucky and other being bad for new ventures. Most of these, if not all, are related to the old Chinese lunar-solar calendar. The calendar exists of 10 stems and 12 zodiac animal signs that together form 60 units. Each unit represents a year in the sexagenary cycle, which is a 60 year cycle. The Chinese lunar-solar calendar was adopted in Japan in the seventh century AD. Vast amount of astrological lore is associated with and probably accompanied the calendar when it was adopted in Japan. According to them the year in which people are born can affect their future and some years in people’s life are considered to be more fortunate than others. Wedding ceremonies are usually not held in the year of the tiger for fear of the bride may possibly run away fast like a tiger. There is also the idea that a person can possess the characteristic of the animal of the year they are born in. A person born in the year of the dog, for example, will then be considered unusually willful and headstrong, while a person born in the year of the cow is slow moving and stubborn with a strong will. Some days of the month can also be better than other for various things, like marriage, funeral and traveling. This is called taian-butsumetsu (大安─仏滅) and is based on the old six day lunar calendar. Even after the solar Gregorian calendar was adopted in Japan in 1873 this belief continued to remain strong. The calendar that carries the information on what days are lucky and unlucky is called rokuyo (六曜). Here you can see the six day rokuyo calendar of January 2010:

![Rokuyo Calendar of January 2010](image)

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34 De Garis et al., 2002, p.314
35 Simon. 1952, p.288
Sensho (先勝) – The morning is lucky but afternoon is unlucky.

Tomobiki (友引) – Good luck all day, except around noon.

Senbu (先負) – The opposite of sensho, the morning is unlucky but afternoon lucky.

Butsumetsu (仏滅) – The whole day is unlucky. Some say that originally the word was written 物滅 and that later the first kanji 物 meaning thing or product was replaced with its homophone 仏 which means Buddha. The latter kanji 滅 can be translated as to extinguish and therefore some people believe that it means Buddha’s death day although most Buddhist do not ascribe to this.

Taian (大安) – The whole day is lucky.

Shakko (赤口) – The opposite of tomobiki with bad luck all day, except around noon.36

Weddings are invariably conducted on taian days and patients in hospitals often wish to extend their stay in the hospital so they can be discharged on taian day. This has even contributed to higher medical care costs in Japan.37 Funerals are avoided on tomobiki days; it is believed that if a funeral is conducted on this day it will soon be followed with another death in the family. In the past, if a funeral had to be held on this day, a doll was placed with the dead body and it was supposed to take the place of the person that would have otherwise died next.38

Icelandic culture possesses a similar superstition, with every day having a different meaning, although it is generally thought of as a saying today. Sunday for winning, Monday for tiredness, Tuesday for hardship or cleaning, Wednesday for mud, Thursday for advancement, Friday for money and Saturday for luck.39 People used to belief that people born on Tuesdays for example would have a hard life, people born on Saturdays would be lucky and so on. Today people do not think it matters what day you are born but if you are having a bad Monday people will often say to you: “Monday for tiredness”, as to remind you that you are only having a bad day because it is Monday.

3.4.1 Yakudoshi (厄年)

Japanese believe that some years in their lives are more unlucky than others, these unlucky years are called yakudoshi (厄年), meaning literally ‘unlucky year’. The origin of yakudoshi

36 Tom Gally. http://www.jekai.org/entries/aa/00/nn/aa00nn61.htm
37 Kenji Hira, Tsuguya Fukui, Akira Endoh, Mahbubur Rahman, and Munetaka Maekawa. 1998, pp.1680-1681
38 De Garis et al., 2002, p.292
39 Jón Árnason. 1864, p.558
is not well known. Big part of it seems to have originally derived from China, altering in Japan and intermingling with older, non-Chinese practices and beliefs. There are some variations but usually for women the ages 19, 33 and 37 and for men 25, 42 and 61 are what are called in Japanese yakudoshi. At this age people can expect some serious misfortunes to happen to them. Some say that this is based upon word play. The number 33 can be (but usually is not) read as sanzan, which can be translated as misery and the number 42 can be read as shini, which can mean “to die”. The 33rd year for women and the 42nd for men are considered especially dangerous, called daiyakudoshi (大厄年). During that time people should avoid taking long journeys and if it is necessary to do anything important during that year they should take great care and follow the rules of taian-butsumetsu days carefully. It is also important to take part in various rituals and festivals and many shrines and temples offer ritual cleansing for people during their yakudoshi years. Children born during their parents’ daiyakudoshi year were historically sometimes called yakugo (厄子) meaning bad luck child, or onigo (鬼子) meaning devil child. Rituals were performed to ward off their bad luck.

Although historically very important, the fact that only 55% of respondents said that it was important to get a blessing on a yakudoshi, the belief seems to have lost some of its influence in later years. Still over half of the respondents did profess belief in this. One respondent in the age group 21-25 had never heard of getting a blessing on yakudoshi and did not really know what the question meant. This might indicate that younger people are not as aware of this superstition.

3.4.2 Hinoeuma (丙午)

The superstition of hinoeuma (丙午) is based on the sexagenary cycle, as discussed in chapter 3.4. Hinoeuma, the year of the fire horse, takes place every 60 years, when the horse year and fire element align together. Part of the character for horse contains the symbol for fire so some might say it means double fire and fires have always been associated with disasters in Japan. Some say that astrologers in seventeenth century noticed links between hinoeuma and disastrous historical events that further actuated the superstition of hinoeuma as a bad year, but no evidence of that seems to exist today. The last hinoeuma year was in 1966 so the next time it will occur is in 2026. A girl born in the year of hinoeuma is said to be strong-willed.

Edward Norbeck. 1955, p.107
De Garis et al., 2002, p.27
Norbeck. 1955, pp.111-112
Daniel M. Goodkind. 1991, p.683
and unmarriageable and in the past people have tried to avoid having a girl in hinoeuma year, as can be seen in table 2 by how the birth rate in Japan dropped drastically in the year 1966. It is also said that the birth rate in the hinoeuma year before 1966, 1906, dropped drastically, about 5.2% from 1905, but since there is not much data existing from that time it is hard to prove. This short drop in birthrate in 1966 is said to be only linked to the year of hinoeuma and not to technical advances. 44

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Live births</th>
<th>Abortions</th>
<th>Total pregnancies</th>
<th>Observed</th>
<th>Expected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1965</strong></td>
<td>1,823,697</td>
<td>161,617</td>
<td>1,985,314</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1966</strong></td>
<td>1,360,974</td>
<td>148,248</td>
<td>1,509,222</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1967</strong></td>
<td>1,935,647</td>
<td>149,389</td>
<td>2,085,036</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

Participants of the survey were asked if they would feel uncomfortable having a daughter in the year of hinoeuma. 87% said they would not feel uncomfortable, but 13% would feel uncomfortable. It seems that as with yakudoshi this superstition has lost some its influence over the years. It will be interesting to see if the birthrate will drop in 2026, which is possibly the only way to really tell if this superstition is still going strong.

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44 Robert J. Smith. 1992, p.21-22
45 Table 2: Smith. 1992, p.22
4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this research was to see what superstitious beliefs are known in Japan and if they have any effect on the behavior and everyday life of people in modern day Japan. Seeing as Japan is generally known as a highly technological and advanced country the results of the survey were quite surprising. The majority of the participants in the survey consider themselves to be superstitious to certain degree. The data collected indicate that in most cases superstition does affect their daily lives and behavior, many feel bad if they lay down shortly after eating and almost no one sticks their chopsticks into a bowl of rice, for example. In some cases people are aware of the superstition but it does not have any major effect on them in daily life, as exemplified by 37% hiding their thumbs sometimes or always if a hearse drives by. This is still a considerable group and should not be ignored. Superstitious beliefs seem to be very rich in Japan. Many old superstitions like maneki neko are still full of life and new ones emerge regularly, such as having a Kit Kat bar as a lucky charm. According to the results of this survey it would seem that Japanese people are a very superstitious nation and that superstition influences them in many ways every day. It would be interesting to see where Japan stands in comparison to other countries and that is fodder for further research.

A few difficulties arose while writing the thesis. A number of sources remained unavailable to me due to linguistic limitations. There exist many books and articles in English about Japanese superstitions in general but they do not go deep enough into the details of the superstitions, their origins nor whether it is something people today take seriously.

There were both advantages and disadvantages of doing an online survey. Not being present in Japan whilst conducting the survey left me with very few options other than conducting an online survey. The main disadvantages with that were that it took longer time waiting for responses and if respondents were in doubt they had no way of asking directly for further information. Three of the participants only answered the first few questions and then stopped. This was perhaps due to some minor confusion which could have been fixed if I had been available to answer questions right away. However, if it were not for the possibility of an online survey this survey probably would have never been conducted. Being able to query people living in different places online is a great option. People are also less afraid to express themselves and their thoughts anonymously online than face to face and since superstition and belief can be a sensitive subject conducting an online survey was very useful.
It would very informative to go on to do a larger survey with more participants. With mere 50 participants the data does not constitute a comprehensive enough overview of the thinking of the majority in Japan.

The details of the superstitions questioned in the survey would also be interesting to look further into. For example discover where and in what situation people heard of a superstition for the first time. It would also be of great interest to ask people to mention other superstitions they have heard of or believe in and that way get a clearer view of what is actually believed and practiced in Japan today. The influence of taian-butsumetsu on young people today might be interesting to get a closer look at. The stories of Kuchisake onna (口裂け女) and Toire no hanako (トイレの花子) are urban contemporary legends that have survived for a long time in Japan and it would be interesting to see how pervasive they are today and if they have changed over the years.

This research clearly demonstrates that there are many things in contemporary popular belief in Japan that can still and should be investigated further. By examining superstitions and popular beliefs of a nation you get to know the people better and understand how and why they think and act like they do. It can show us the differences as well as the similarities between people and different cultures better than many other indicators. Therefore people should not keep prejudice against superstitious beliefs but recognize them and embrace them.
Bibliography


こんにちは。
私の名前はラウラ・オスク・ハフベルグスドッチルです。私はアイスランド大学で日本の言語と社会を勉強しています。私はこの秋に卒業します。そして卒論では日本の迷信と都市伝説について調べています。少し質問に答えお願いします。このアンケートは匿名でお願いします。答えからあなたに戻って情報を追跡することはできません。あなたの名前は私の最終の論文のどこにも表示されません。ご協力ありがとうございます。

1. 性別
男性
女性

2. 年齢
16-20
21-25
26-30
31-40
41-50
51-60
61+

3. 出身地
北海道
東北
関東
中部
関西
中国
四国
九州
4. あなたは迷信を信じますか
はい
いいえ
時々

5. 夜口笛を吹くとヘビ（または泥棒）が来ると聞いたことがありますか
はい
いいえ

6. 夜口笛を吹くのは気分が悪いですか
はい
時々
いいえ、信じていません、気にしません

7. 食べてすぐ横になると牛になるという話は聞いたことがありますか
はい
いいえ

8. 食べてすぐ横になるのはよくないと思いますか
はい
時々
いいえ、信じていません、気にしません

9. 北枕で寝ることは縁起が悪いと聞いたことがありますか
はい
いいえ
10. 自分の枕を北まくらにしないようにしていますか
はい
時々
いいえ、信じていません、気にしません

11. 霊柩車が通り過ぎる時に親指を隠さないと、両親が死ぬという話をきいたことがありますか
はい
いいえ

12. 霊柩車が通り過ぎる時に親指を隠しますか
はい
時々
いいえ、信じていません、気にしません

13. はしをごはんにまっすぐとつきますか
はい
いいえ
時々

14. 3人で写真に写る時に真ん中にいると突然死に合うという話は聞いたことがありますか
はい
いいえ

15. 写真を撮る時に真ん中にいないように確認しますか
はい
時々
いいえ、信じていません、気にしません
16. 店を持つとしたら招き猫を置きますか
はい
たぶん
いいえ、信じていません、気にしません

17. お守りをもっていますか
はい
いいえ

18. いらなくなったお守りを神社でたきあげるのは重要ですか
はい
いいえ

19. やくどしに厄払いは重要ですか
はい
いいえ

20. ひのえうまの年に娘を生ことは悪いと思っていますか
はい
いいえ

どうもありがとうございました。ご意見やご質問がある方は私にメールを送ってください loh2@hi.is
Appendix 2

Survey in English

Good day,

My name is Lára Ósk Hafbergsdóttir and I am a student in Japanese Language and Society at the University of Iceland. I am graduating this fall and I am currently working on my final thesis that will discuss Japanese superstition and folktales. I would be very grateful if you could spend few minutes answering my questions about Japanese superstition and folktales.

This questionnaire is anonymous. The answers given can not be traced back to you and your name will not appear anywhere in my final thesis.

1. Gender:
   Male
   Female

2. Age:
   16-20
   21-25
   26-30
   31-40
   41-50
   51-60
   61+

3. Where do you come from?
   Hokkaido region
   Tohoku region
   Kanto region
   Chubu region
   Kansai region
Chugoku region
Shikoku region
Kyushu region

4. Do you consider yourself as superstitious?
Yes
No
Sometimes

5. Have you ever heard that if you whistle at night snakes (robbers) will come to your house?
Yes
No

6. Do you feel bad if you whistle at night?
Yes
Sometimes
No/ I don’t believe in it / it does not matter to me

7. Have you ever heard that if you lie down shortly after eating you will turn into a cow?
Yes
No

8. Do you feel bad if you lie down shortly after eating?
Yes
Sometimes
No/ I don’t believe in it / it does not matter to me
9. Have you ever heard that it is a bad omen sleeping with your pillow facing north?
   Yes
   No

10. Do you make sure that your pillow does not face north?
    Yes
    Sometimes
    No/ I don't believe in it / it does not matter to me

11. Have you ever heard that if a hearse drives by you should hide your thumb or your parents will die?
    Yes
    No

12. Do you hide your thumb when a hearse drives by?
    Yes
    Sometimes
    No/ I don't believe in it / it does not matter to me

13. Do you stick your chopsticks upright in your rice?
    Yes
    No
    Sometimes

14. Have you ever heard that if you take a picture of 3 people the person in the middle will die a sudden death?
    Yes
    No
15. If there is a picture taken of you with two other people do you make sure that you are not in the middle?

Yes
Sometimes
No/ I don’t believe in it / it does not matter to me

16. If you had a shop would you have maneki neko there?

Yes
Maybe
No/ I don’t believe in it / it does not matter to me

17. Do you have omamori?

Yes
No

18. Is it important to burn omamori in a shrine?

Yes
No

19. Is it important to get a blessing on yakudoshi?

Yes
No

20. Would you feel uncomfortable having a daughter in the year of Hinoeuma?

Yes
No

Thank you for your participation. If you have any questions about this survey, the essay I am writing or if you have something you would like to share with me then please contact me by sending an e-mail to loh2@hi.is.