Setsubun (節分）—February 3rd

Overview:

The festival of Setsubun—when people throw soybeans at demons—follows closely on the heels of New Year's. The word *setsubun* means "changing of the seasons," so there are actually four *setsubun* a year on the day before each new season begins. But because of the importance of the New Year in the Japanese calendar, the *setsubun* directly before the start of spring was by far the most important and is currently the only one widely celebrated in Japan. When seasons change, people are at their most vulnerable to influenza, colds, or other ailments. The rituals for the festival of Setsubun are meant to purge ones house and surroundings of all bad things and to keep disease and misfortune at bay.

Before switching to the Gregorian calendar in the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japan's annual rituals were closely based on the Chinese calendar. Setsubun falls around the time of the lunar New Year and was originally part of the New Year's celebrations. In China and Japan, many people believe that misfortunes are caused by demons, or *oni*. The practice of purging ones house of *oni* was originally a New Year's Eve ritual in China, and this was adopted in Japan, along with Buddhism in the 8th century. But the question remains, why were soybeans thought to have the power to drive the demons away?

To find an answer, we must go back in time and look at Chinese numerology, where many concepts come in fives to correspond to the five elements—wood, water, fire, metal, and earth. Soybeans were included in what were designated the "5 cereals," or the five most important crops. Soybeans (or "daizu" [大豆], literally "the big bean") were considered particularly powerful because they were believed to contain the spirits of all the cereals combined. *Mame* (豆), or bean, is a homophone for *mame* (魔滅), which means "destroying evil," so soybeans were thought to be especially effective weapons against *oni* demons—somewhat like garlic is believed to be powerful against vampires in the West. This is how throwing soybeans at demons became the central ritual of Setsubun. This ritual is done to purge ones life of all the invisible *oni* demons in ones surroundings and to ensure health and good fortune for the coming year.

In schools in Japan, students typically make *oni* masks at this time. The principal of the school or the teachers might dress up as *oni* demons, and children will throw roasted soybeans at them, calling "*Oni wa soto!* (Out with the demons!) *Fuku wa uchi!* (In with good fortune!)." This ceremony might be repeated at home and is also carried out at various temples throughout Japan. After the bean-throwing ritual (*mamemaki*), people count out and eat the number of roasted soybeans equal to their age plus one more to protect them in the year ahead. These beans are

called *fuku-mame* (good fortune beans). For good measure, people might also decorate the outside of their houses with prickly holly leaves and sardine heads because *oni* demons are known to avoid the sharp thorns of the holly and to detest the smell of sardines. In the Kansai region (near Osaka and Kyoto), it's also typical to eat *ehou-maki*, an over-sized sushi roll with 7 ingredients (indicating luck). In recent years, eating this traditional dish has become popular throughout Japan.

Unit Title: Celebrating *Setsubun*

Language Arts/ Social Studies/Visual Arts (K-8)

Unit goals/ Standards:

CCRA.SL.1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on other's ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively

CCRA.SL.2 Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally

CCRA.R.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words

Lesson Plan One: Oni Mask-Making (Grades K-8)

- **One day (40-50 minutes)**

Lesson Plan Two: *Mamemaki* (Bean-throwing)

- **Two Days (40-50 minutes each)**

Essential questions:

1) **How do different cultures express ideas of good and evil?**

2) **How do other cultures express traditions and ideas related to the changing of seasons?**

3) **) Since Japanese *oni* are not indigenous to Japan, what does this say about how Japanese culture has perceived outsiders and foreigners?**

4) ***Oni* were used in the past as a way to explain bad things that happened before people had scientific explanations. How do we protect ourselves against disease and bad things happening today?**

Lesson Plan One: (Grades K-8) Oni Mask-making

Key resources:

Kamishibai cards:

"The Magic Rice Paddle" By Etsu Sasaki, Illustrated by Hiroshi Suzuki, Translated by Donna Tamaki (Tokyo: Doshinsha)

"The Three Magic Charms" Adapted by Miyoko Matsutani, Illustrated by Futamata Eigorō, Translated by Donna Tamaki (Tokyo: Doshinsha)

Picture books:

"The Funny Little Woman" by Arlene Mosel, Illustrated by Blair Lent (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972) (This is a version of "The Magic Rice Paddle," based on a story collected by Lafcadio Hearn.)

Oni are actually the Japanese version of Indian rakshasas, who were thought to inhabit the Buddhist underworld. These colorful characters traveled to China and eventually made their way to Japan via Korea in the 8th century along with Buddhism. That *oni* come from outside Japan is evident in their appearance and clothing. Typically, *oni* have green, red, or blue skin, at least one horn and fangs, and wear a tiger-skin skirt. They usually are hairy and unkempt and are depicted as tall and muscular. *Oni* love gold, so they are often seen wearing gold earrings and gold bands on their arms and wrists. Female *oni* (*Oni-baba* or *Yamanba*) do exist, as can be seen in the folktale of "The Three Magic Charms," but they rarely appear in the same stories with the males.

There is an expression in Japanese: *Oni ni kanabo* (which literally means "To an Oni, his metal club"). This expression is used to describe something or someone, who is already powerful, when they are able to acquire something that makes them even more so. Even without their clubs, *oni* are powerful, so having a metal club makes them invincible. It is a good thing that humans have figured out that *oni* are weak against soybeans, or we wouldn't stand a chance! But, as students learn more about oni through the folktales in this lesson plan, they will find out about other weaknesses *oni* demons have and other magical implements, as well.

Materials needed:

- Paper plates (one per student)
- Oni features template (downloadable)
- Crayons, scissor, and glue

Day 1: (45-50 minutes)

Step one: Read the kamishibai "The Magic Rice Paddle"

Cultural background and synopsis:

In this story, a poor old woman chases after her *dango* (rice cake) and ends up going down to the underworld, where *oni* demons capture her and put her to work in their kitchens. They give her a magic rice paddle so that she can make enough food from a small handful of rice to feed them all. The old woman misses her home and the people of her village so she escapes from the *oni*, still holding the magic rice paddle. Once she gets back to her village, she uses the magic implement to feed all the poor people in the community.

Note: The presence of *Ojizō-sama* in this story is also significant. *Ojizō-sama* is the Buddha, who protects children and poor people. In this story, he seems somewhat irresponsible letting the oni demons take the old woman with them. But later, he tells her to take the magic rice paddle and seems to have known that it would all turn out well for her in the end.

Step two: Discuss the images of *oni* in the story. How are they different from ogres and monsters in other stories that the students may have heard about? Note the different characteristics of oni: the brightly colored skin, tiger pants, etc…This could also be an good time to bring up Buddhism and ideas of good and evil in different cultures and religious traditions. Older students could compare images of rakshasas from India to Japanese oni and learn how Buddhism traveled from India, via China and Korea to Japan.

Step three: After reading the stories and discussing the role and characteristics of the *oni* in the stories, explain to the students about Setsubun and that children in Japan typically make *oni* masks in school. Hand out materials to make oni masks and encourage the students to make them colorful like the *oni* in the story. Students should not feel restricted by the template but should feel free to design their own *oni* features and color them accordingly.

Lesson Plan Two: Mamemaki (Bean-throwing)

Day One: ***Mamemaki*** (Bean-throwing) ritual (preparation)

Materials needed:

- Posterboard (one per group of three students)
- Pens and crayons or paint
- Soybeans (some roasted, if possible)
- Instructions to make origami *masu* (boxes to hold the beans)
- Square paper for folding the *masu* (one per student)
- Words for the Setsubun song

Schools in Japan often allow the students to throw beans at adults dressed as *oni* demons, but American school children are usually discouraged from throwing anything at another person, whether adults or classmates. In order for American students to enjoy the ritual of bean-throwing, in spite of this difficulty, teachers can have the students make large *oni* posters for the occasion. They can work in groups to design their own large and colorful *oni*, based on everything they know about *oni* and their characteristics from the stories.

Step one: Read the kamishibai story of "The Three Magic Charms."

Synopsis and Cultural Background:

In "The Three Magic Charms," a little boy, who lives and works in a temple, is invited into the forest to the home of a kindly old lady. Fearing that the old lady may be a *yamanba* or *oni-baba* (female *oni*), the temple priest gives the boy three paper charms to help him escape. This story shows how *oni* are also shape-shifters that can appear out of nowhere and do people harm. In the end, the temple priest is able to outwit the monster.

Step two: Discuss this story and compare it to "The Magic Rice Paddle." Like the *Ojizō-sama* in the earlier story, the Buddhist temple priest has the powers necessary to protect the little boy. Have the students compare and contrast the male *oni* in the first story and the female *oni* in the second story. If possible, bring in other images of Japanese demons from other sources for further inspiration (see resources below).

Step three: Divide students into teams to design their own demon posters on posterboard.

Day Two: *Mamemaki* (Bean-throwing) ritual

Once the posters are completed, they can be taped to a wall in the classroom or gym or, if the weather is fine, outside. Students can make their own origami *masu*, or boxes to hold the beans. (Alternatively, they can just take a handful of beans to throw when the time comes.) Then they can practice the song that is typically sung on this occasion (see below), or they can just shout out: "Oni wa soto! Fuku wa uchi!" while throwing beans at the posters. Roasted beans can be put aside for eating (if there are no allergies). Students should count out enough roasted soybeans to equal their age, plus one to protect them in the year ahead.

Setsubun Song

Oni wa soto! Fuku wa uchi! Para, para, para, para, mame no oto

Out with oni! In with good fortune! Para, para, para, para—the sound of beans being thrown

Oni wa kossori nigete yuku

Oni quietly sneak away.

Oni wa soto! Fuku wa uchi! Para, para, para, para, mame no oto

Out with oni! In with good fortune! Para, para, para, para—the sound of beans being thrown

Hayaku ohairi fuku no kami

Gods of good fortune, quickly come inside!

Note for teachers of middle-school students: Discussion of *oni* demons does not have to be limited to language arts and folklore. It is a great opportunity to discuss many issues across the curriculum, including science and history and even questions of social justice. As mentioned above, *oni* were traditionally blamed for the spread of diseases and many bad things that we have scientific explanations for today. During World War II, *oni* were frequently used in war propaganda, where the allied forces were often depicted as *oni* demons threatening Japan. Reflections on how *oni* have been used in the past can open up discussion of more sensitive issues, such as how outsiders are sometimes treated in different societies or by different social groups.

Lesson Outcomes:

At the end of this three-day lesson plan, students will be able to describe the characteristic features of *oni* demons and explain their significance in the context of Japanese folklore and Buddhist beliefs, as well as in the festival of Setsubun.

Essential Skills:

Cooperative learning, group discourse, critical thinking, character development

Resource sited:

"The Magic Rice Paddle" By Etsu Sasaki, Illustrated by Hiroshi Suzuki, Translated by Donna Tamaki (Tokyo: Doshinsha)

"The Three Magic Charms" Adapted by Miyoko Matsutani, Illustrated by Futamata Eigorō, Translated by Donna Tamaki (Tokyo: Doshinsha)

"The Funny Little Woman" by Arlene Mosel, Illustrated by Blair Lent (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972) (This is a version of "The Magic Rice Paddle.")

Kamishibai cards may be purchased through Kamishibai for Kids: kamishi@kamishibai.com

Website: http://www.kamishibai.com/

Other useful resources:

Kids Web Japan on Setsubun: **http://web-japan.org/kidsweb/explore/calendar/february.html**

All about Japanese monsters and demons: **http://yokai.com/oni/**

Oni are also popular figures in Japanese manga. This website lists some popular series that draw upon Japanese mythology: **http://www.anime-planet.com/manga/tags/japanese-mythology**

Noriko Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore: Oni from Ancient Times to the Present* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2010).

Willamarie Moore and Kazumi Wilds, *All About Japan: Stories, Songs, Crafts and More* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2011).

Rebecca Otowa, *My Awesome Japan Adventure: A Diary about the Best 4 Months Ever!* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2013).

Betty Reynolds, *Japanese Celebrations: Cherry Blossoms, Lanterns and Stars!* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2006).

Gail R. Benjamin, *Japanese Lessons: A Year in a Japanese School Through the Eyes of an American Anthropologist and Her Children* (NYU Press, 1998).