

Hatsugeiko and Kagami Biraki

明けましておめでとうございます。 *Akemashite omedetou gozaimasu!* Happy New Year! These are words most likely to be heard at *hatsugeiko*, the first training of the New Year. Traditional Japanese fare following a robust class is Japanese *adzuki* beans and *mochi* rice cakes, each having significance for the coming year's training. *Mame*, the Japanese word for beans, suggests *mamemameshiku*, which means “diligently”, and the sticky rice cake is intended to help students stick to their training. Saké adds a little bravado.

Kagami mochi has a different meaning. *Kagami mochi*, literally “mirror rice cakes”, is the large round rice cakes arranged as a decoration each New Year, but the significance is centuries old. The mirror is one of the three imperial regalia of Japan, representing three basic virtues—wisdom from reflection (the mirror), valor from action (the sword), and benevolence from the balance of mind, body, and spirit (the jewel). The significance of the mirror is revealed in the myth of Amaterasu, the sun goddess. Her brother Susanō, the storm god, had laid waste to her rice fields. Angered by her brother's unruly nature, she hid herself in a cave and plunged the world into darkness. Crops were withering without the nurturing light of Amaterasu, so the other gods contrived a plan to coax her from hiding, setting up a large mirror to catch the light of a great fire around which the goddess of merriment performed a strip tease. Curious about the merry-making, the sun goddess peeked out of her cave and saw her reflection for the first time in the great mirror. Realizing that she had been holding an unreasonable grudge against her brother, she revealed herself at last.

Kagami biraki celebrates Amaterasu's “enlightenment”. Traditionally falling on January 11, the ceremony is performed by “breaking” *kagami mochi* or a round cask of saké, symbolic of the mirror, to mark the importance of self-reflection, personal redefinition, and self-refinement at the commencement of a New Year full of promise and potential.

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