

# TOKYO TALES

By Carole Hallett Mobbs

## Superstitions

A fascinating conversation prompted me to investigate Japanese superstitions. My friend was perplexed when I automatically remarked "bless you" when she sneezed. Her bemusement came from her belief that the sneeze indicated that someone was speaking ill of her, so why would I invoke a blessing, and therefore agree with the sentiment?

As in Britain, some superstitions are considered amusing and foolish, but many are taken very seriously indeed. As a rule, the more acknowledged taboos are associated with death.

Never set your bed with your head facing north as this is the way the dead are laid out. Don't stick your chopsticks upright in a bowl of rice because this is how rice is presented at a funeral. Passing food from chopstick to chopstick is wrong, as bone fragments from a cremated body are passed from person to person using chopsticks before being placed in an urn.

Cutting your nails at night is considered a bad move because it means you will not be with your parents when they die. Likewise, wearing socks in bed brings the same misfortune.

Superstitions surrounding numbers form a huge part of Japanese life, with the number four being the most unlucky. Nothing is produced in sets of four. In Japanese, 'four' is pronounced *shi*, which is also the same word for death. The number nine is also avoided, due to the phonetic connection with the word for pain, suffering or worry. Hospitals never have fourth or ninth floors and wards are also carefully numbered. 'Forty two' is pronounced *shi-ni*, which also means to die, and 'forty three' is banned in maternity hospitals as the number translates as 'still-birth'.

Not all superstitions are doom and gloom though. It is considered good luck to see a spider in the morning, but bad luck if you see one at night, so you can kill it with impunity. But this is definitely bad luck for the spider.

Family life has a number of unusual beliefs too; hangnails mean you haven't been listening to your mother. A woman must clean the toilet every day as it will ensure the woman keeps her good looks and also that her children will be good looking. Apparently a goddess lingers around the toilet so when you clean it, some of her

beauty will rub off onto you.

What did your mother tell you to eat to make your hair curl? Children here are encouraged to eat their *hijiki* to make their hair black. *Hijiki* is black string-like seaweed.

And as for pregnancy, old wives tales abound here as well as in Britain. Expectant mothers are encouraged to eat lots of top quality sushi to increase their child's intelligence; recent medical studies have proved some truth with this, but one also shouldn't eat seafood with claws, like crabs and lobsters, otherwise their offspring will become criminals. Also, don't sit with your legs crossed as you will suffocate the baby.

During thunderstorms, young children can often be seen clutching their stomachs. It's said that lightning comes down and might snatch their belly button!

Shrines and temples sell many charms to ward off evil or bring good luck, and there are also 'lucky dips' containing tiny rolls of paper on which a fortune is written. If you pull out a good fortune, keep it; but if it's unpleasant, leave it at the shrine by tying it to a nearby stand as shown in our picture. The idea is to leave the bad luck at the shrine, where the divine spirit can exorcise it.

I wish you all good luck and fortune until next time, touch wood!

