

KYOTO TEMPLE CELEBRATIONS

AT Chi-on-in temple of the Jōdo sect a celebration and festival has recently taken place commemorating the seven hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Jōdo in Japan. A whole week was given to the celebration and every day was devoted to sutra-reading, temple ceremonies, lectures, and sacred dances. I attended the last day. The Main Hall was filled to overflowing with devout worshippers. Five hundred priests clad in rich temple vestments knelt on each side of the altar which was elaborately decorated. The ceremony was conducted by the Abbot, Genwu Yamashita, an aged man of over ninety years. The chanting was much softer and quieter than in other temples, a continuous adoration of Amida and a murmur of *Namu namu*, filled the recesses of the Hall. At the ending of the Sutra, the Abbot rose from the dais where he had been sitting facing the altar and surrounded by many priests all bending low in adoration, and turned towards the kneeling worshippers in an attitude of blessing—this old, old man raised his *hossu** and gazed silently upon the devotees of Amida and saintly Hōnen; for at Chi-on-in it is to Hōnen Shōnin that respect is paid and reverence is given. It was a dramatic moment—the dropping of a pin could have been heard, so intense was the silence, the Abbot bending over slightly kept his gaze fixed upon the kneeling throngs, and they in turn gazed motionless and silently at their aged leader.

Afterwards, I with crowds of others offered incense at the altar beautifully decorated with lights and flowers and heaped with offerings. The priests in their gorgeous robes wearing peculiarly shaped hats, passed out of the temple and in single

* Literally, a whisk, originally used for driving away annoying insects while in meditation, but later turned into a religious article symbolising spiritual authority.

file went up a long stone staircase to the tomb of Saint Hōnen to offer their respects. It seems to me that I have never seen such beautiful robes as worn by these priests—imperial purple and royal scarlet, rose pink and sea green, and over their robes were *kesa* or shoulder dresses of gold brocade of the richest designs. Behind these gorgeously clad priests walked students and other laymen and also many sweet-faced nuns, for the Jōdo is the sect that has more nuns than any other sect in Japan, and I saw many at the celebration, both old and young.

Outside, in front of the Main Temple was the stage for the sacred dance. The dancers were young men clad in brilliant dresses with gauzy trains, and they performed some lovely dances, dignified and full of grace and charm. The sacred dances are supposed to depict the worshipping of the Buddha. The long and sweeping motions of the dancers, the peculiar positions of the feet, the rhythmic steps accompanied by flowing movements of the arms and even the positions of the fingers all have deep meaning and rouse in the spectator, not only esthetic pleasure but a subtle religious sentiment, and he can imagine for a brief space that he is transported to Gokuraku (paradise) where the holy Bodhisattvas dance to express their ecstasies of spiritual joy.

The scene for these dances taking place outdoors against a background of rocks and flowering plum trees was full of enchantment, and on this spring day a soft and gentle snow fell at times like a gossamer veil.

Pictures of Saint Hōnen were presented to some of us; I have hung mine up before me as I write, hoping to receive something of the holy man's spiritual force, and offering my respect to one whose name still has power to move thousands by his example of goodness and religious faith.

Sometime ago, I attended a ceremony at the Eastern Hongwanji held in honour of the death of Shinran Shōnin, the Saint of the Shin-shu. A great throng of worshippers crowded

the spacious temple hall. "The inner circle" around the altar was stately and harmonious as usual, and garlanded with flowers. Saint Shinran's statue on the black lacquer altar was illumined with lights. Many priests clad in pale buff knelt before the shrine. The Abbot seated on one side and his son on the other in robes of black and red took part in the sacred chanting. The "Shōshinge" was recited by pious voices rising and falling in unison. Even in such an enormous crowd the atmosphere was one of quiet and repose. Silence reigned over the great assembly as it hung upon the words of the sacred song.

Everywhere the lotus, the holy flower, the symbol of the soul of man, was pictured in painting and sculpture; the golden *ramma* showed angels and birds of paradise, the odour of incense filled the air. From where I sat, I could look out over the heads of the worshippers, through the great portal where the doves flew, to and fro, to the mountains beyond. Then my eyes turned back to the gleaming candles on the altar and I felt thankful that there was no electric light permitted in the holy hall; for there is something very beautiful about a Buddhist altar gleaming with candle lights. The highly polished black floors reflecting those glimmering flames looked as if they might be pools of water in Amida's paradise. A huge gong struck, vibrating its deep tone throughout the hall, and it was answered by thousands of voices, "Namu-amida-butsu".

The picture made at the altar, the decorations, the kneeling priests made me think of a painting of olden times. At such a time and in such a place one catches a glimpse of old Japan—that old Japan which has gone forever, but here was a real reflection of that ancient world.

The shadows deepened, the temple interior grew darker, the strange music of the Buddhist orchestra, a peculiar combination of drum and flute arose and the priests' voices united in the singing of the "Wasan" (Buddhist psalm). Then the song ceased, the murmuring of the sacred phrase ended, the

ceremony was over, the Abbot and his retinue left the holy circle. The great crowd of worshippers rose to disperse, respect to the spirit of Shinran had been paid.

In the vast temple shadows are falling,
Priests' voices rise in an anthem of prayer,
Incense is floating, candle-lights gleaming,
Pious hearts beating, hands clasped with beads.
Namu-amida is heard on all lips.
Praise be to Buddha! Praise be to Shinran!
See! Through the temple shadows are gathering,
Voices are praising, heads they are bent.
Praise be to Buddha!
Praise be to Shinran!
Hark! Hear the bell!
Hark! Hear the bell!

SEIREN (BLUE LOTUS)