

# SHIN NEN

(The New Year)

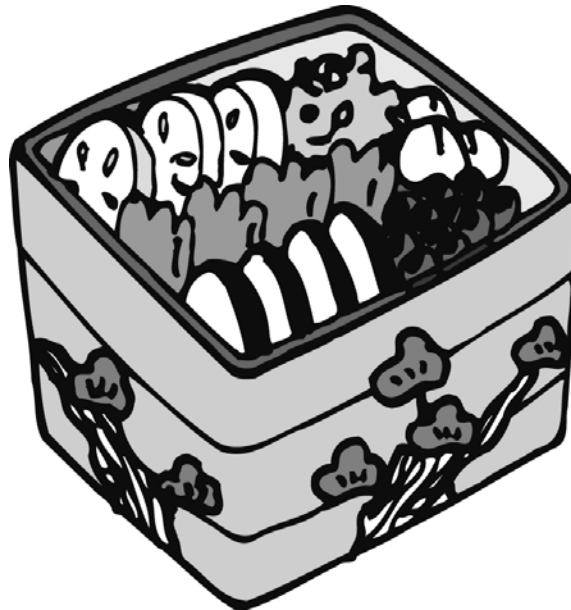
We have many holidays in Japan. The New Year's Day(s) is (are) the most important day(s). We used to celebrate the 3 days from January 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup>, but these days not all Japanese celebrate the New Year's Days. Some only celebrate January 1<sup>st</sup>.

Before World War 2 almost all Japanese celebrated the 3 days (called *Sanganichi* in Japanese) of the New Year. For three days, all shops, stores, factories, schools, businesses, government offices, everything except police stations and shrines were closed. Nowadays, even on January 1<sup>st</sup> many shops are open. We have a convenient life, but I worry that we have lost part of our history and traditional way of life.

In the old days, Japanese people didn't use edged tools, such as knives or scissors, for the entire *Sanganichi* period because they were afraid that it would cause them to be unlucky or to have accidents in the coming year. We usually cooked three days worth of food to last through the New Year period at the end of the year. Such New Year's cooking is generically called *Osechi Ryori* and includes many kind of foods such as *kazunoko* (herring roe), *konbu* (seaweed), *kuromame* (black soybeans), *ebi* (lobster, prawn and shrimp), *kohaku namasu* (carrots and radishes with vinegar), *tazukuri* (dried sardines), *satoimo* (aroid), *kurikinton* (mashed chestnuts), *kamaboko* (boiled fish paste), *kuwai*

(arrowhead) and *tai* (sea bream).

Many of these auspicious foods have auspicious meanings, for example prawns and shrimps are the old-men of the sea, while *kazunoko* (herring eggs) represent a wish for many children.



A set of jubako boxes of pre-cooked Osechi Ryori

These pre-cooked meals are packed in *Jubako* (a series of boxes stacked onto each other) until the day they are served. There are rules for how to present the boxes, and each box has a name, derived from its number from the top shelf. The fish are packed into the top box (*Ichi no Ju.*) Pickled foods are packed in the second box (*Ni no Ju.*) Baked foods in the third (*San no Ju.*) and boiled foods in the fourth (*Yo no Ju.* never "shi-no-ju" because the

number four, "shi", is a homonym of "death.") *Go no Ju* (the fifth box) contains other foods.

One of the main foods for New Years in Japan is *Ozoni* a kind of soup which has *mochi* rice cakes in it. A large number of Japanese eat *Ozoni* and *Osechi Ryori* on New Years day and adults drink *sake*.

I hope you had a wonderful New Year and that you were able to see some of our wonderful traditions too.

By Takeshi Beppu