

Tanabata: The Japanese “Wish Upon a Star” Festival

East Asian Seminar

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Purpose:

Astronomy undergirds many legends from around the world. *Tanabata* offers one explanation behind why and when *Orihime* (Vega, the Weaver Star) and *Hikoboshi* (Altair, the Cow Herd Star) align in the sky.

Essential Questions:

1. What is *Tanabata*?
2. What is the legend behind *Tanabata*?
3. How and where is *Tanabata* celebrated in Japan today?

Rationale:

Holidays and festivals often have meaning beyond surface manifestations. Streamers, papers with words, nets, and bags without an understanding of the beliefs behind what is visible would leave little insight into the *Tanabata* festival.

Materials:

1. History of *Tanabata*
2. Song about *Tanabata* and a link to the melody

Activities:

Ask students if they can recall any stories or legends about the stars. (They will probably be able to tell you about Orion the Hunter, his belt, the Big Dipper.)

Introduce students to *Tanabata*, the Japanese Star Festival. Use the history handout or do your own Web search.

Have students research the festival through Web sites, such as:

<http://gojapan.about.com/cs/japanesefestivals/a/tanabata.htm>

<http://web.mit.edu/jpnet/holidays/Jul/tanabata.shtml>

<http://www.lbcma.org.uk/festivals/Mtanabata.asp>

<http://photojpn.org/matsuri/tohoku/tana1.html>

<http://starfestival.com/>

Have them jot down information about the stars (*Orihime*-Vega and *Hikoboshi*-Altair); why and when they are said to align in the sky based on the old Chinese legend of *Kikkoden*; and what *tanzaku*, *toami*, and *kinchaku* mean and symbolize. Ask them to find cities in Japan known for their *Tanabata* celebrations. You may choose to have groups of students focus on parts of the information and then share what they have found with the rest of the class or ask each student to find all of the information.

Once research is completed, lead a class discussion on findings.

Teach your students the famous *Tanabata* song in Japanese. Download the tune and pronunciation of the song at <http://web.mit.edu/jpnet/holidays/Jul/tanabata.shtml>. Once downloaded, you may play the song from your computer without Internet access. See handout for Romanized lyrics and translation.

Tell students that they are going to share what they have learned about *Tanabata* with primary students. A good time for such a presentation is International Studies Week in November although internationalizing the curriculum is always appropriate! See assessment, below.

Assessment:

First, have your students prepare and present a short role play to primary children on the story behind the *Tanabata* festival. Give groups of students adequate time (15 minutes) to write a draft narrative and then have the groups share their versions. Once the class agrees on sentences or ideas from each narrative, compile a consensus version. Ask one person to be the narrator and three others to play the main characters, *Orihime*, *Hikoboshi*, and the King. Others should play the *Amanogawa* River (Milky Way), the calendar months of July and August, and the number seven. Still others should act out writing their wishes on *tanzaku* paper and hanging them on leafy bamboo. Have other students hang streamers and decorate with *toami* and *kinchaku*. After practice, have students present the story to primary children.

Next, have your students teach the *Tanabata* song to the primary students. If you have students who can play the piano or flute, have them accompany the group.

Finally, have your students help the primary children make and hang *tanzaku* with their wishes around their classroom or in the school.

Grade Adaptation:

This lesson targets Grade 7.

Older students might be asked to develop a multimedia presentation for local civic, business, or education groups based on the origins, significance, symbols, and song related to the *Tanabata* Festival.

State Standards:

Social Studies

Standard: Peoples in Societies

Benchmark A: Compare cultural practices, products and perspectives of past civilizations in order to understand commonality and diversity of cultures.

Indicator 1: Analyze the relationships among cultural practices, products and perspectives of early civilizations.

Foreign Language

Standard: Connections

Benchmark A: Investigate and report on concepts from across disciplines.

Indicator 1: Identify and/or demonstrate styles of authentic music or dance.

Standard: Communities

Benchmark A: Provide information or services to individuals, the school or the community using knowledge of the target language and culture.

Indicator 1: Present information about the target language and culture to younger students (e.g., celebrations, holidays, the arts).

History of Tanabata

Tanabata is based on a 2000-year-old Chinese tale called *Kikkoden*. It was transmitted to Japan during the feudal period and took on local customs to become an official event at the imperial court. *Tanabata* gained popularity among the masses during the Edo period.

The story goes that a weaver princess named *Orihime* and a cow herder prince named *Hikoboshi* lived among the heavens. When they saw each other, they forgot about their work and played all day. The King was angry at this lack of responsibility and separated them on opposite sides of the *Amanogawa* River (the Milky Way). But, once a year, he allowed them to meet on the seventh day of the seventh month—July 7th on our modern calendar and around August 7th following the lunar calendar.

Tradition has it that *Orihime* and *Hikoboshi* cannot meet each other if it is rainy, so people pray for good weather and make wishes for themselves at the same time. People write their wishes or poems on *tanzaku* paper and hang them on bamboo branches. They also hang streamers of many colors outside of their homes. The streamers are said to represent the weaver's threads. Other symbols of the holiday include *toami* (casting net for good luck with fishing and farming) and *kinchaku* (bag symbolizing wealth).

Locations in Japan with well-known festivals include Sendai (Miyagi Prefecture) and Hiratsuka (Kanagawa Prefecture). You can find beautiful pictures of these festivals at <http://photojpn.org/matsuri/tohoku/tana1.html>.

The Tanabata Song

Go to <http://web.mit.edu/jpnet/holidays/Jul/tanabata.shtml> and download the song to your computer. Once downloaded, you may click the “play” button as many times as necessary for your students to learn the melody and lyrics.

Romanized lyrics

Sasa no ha saara sara
Nokiba ni yureru
Ohoshi-sama kira kira
Kin-gin sunago.

English translation

Bamboo-grass leaves flowing in the wind
Swinging by the edge of the eaves
Stars are shining
Like fine gold and silver sand.