



Harikuyo, the Festival of Broken Needles

On February 8th, all across Japan, *Harikuyo* will take place in Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. *Hari* means needle, and *Kuyou* is a Buddhist memorial service; Memorial services are usually held for spirits of the dead but it is also common to hold them for inanimate objects that have served well in life, or indeed that life depends on.

Known as the Festival of Broken Needles, it is a ritual of thanks and respect for tools of the sewing, tailoring and embroidery trades. It dates back 1500 years; women (and men) dress in fine kimono and gather together all of the needles they've used, broken and/or worn out during the previous year. They proceed to the local temple or shrine, where a three-tiered altar is prepared. The lower level displays sewing accessories, such as scissors, thimbles, thread and so forth. The top tier offers seasonal fruit, and white mochi (ceremonial rice cake offerings). In the center section is a large slab of tofu, into which everyone plunges the pieces of their broken needles.

Later they will be taken to a sacred final resting place. The tofu keeps them safe and not forgotten, yet because of being protected in the tofu they can do no harm with their points. In a second sense they are still present in life. The priest will incant a sutra, that reflects the passage of the needles from use, and invokes a Buddhist blessing that is passed on to the users of the needles. By showing respect to the needles they have used through the past year, they are offering thanks and requesting that the power and energy of the needles be present in the stitchers for the coming year, so that their skills may be improved. Priests will also sing sutras to comfort the needles, heal their broken spirits and thank them for work well done. No sewing takes place on this day.

Resources: *Pulse of the Planet*, presented by the American Museum of Natural History; Rufus, Anneli: *The World Holiday Book*, Harper San Francisco 1994; About.com/Japan