

GRADUATE FELLOW COMPARES SOUTHERN CAMP MEETING, BUDDHIST “FESTIVAL OF THE DEAD”

Esteemed historian C. Van Woodward once said the South has more in common with other countries than it has with the rest of the United States. MARIAL graduate fellow Donna Mote found that to be true when she lived and worked in Japan for five years.

“Japanese folks are seldom at a loss for what to do because they almost always have a social script. And, historically speaking, I think that has been true for most Southerners,” said Mote, who was born and raised in rural Georgia. During her stint as an English teacher in Japan—where she worked primarily in the small town of Miyoshi—she was struck repeatedly by the cultural similarities between the American South and her temporary home thousands of miles away.

“Offering your seat to an older person, standing up when someone older enters the room. All these kinds of things that I learned to do at home were the same things I saw when I lived in Japan,” she said. Just as her mother always had a relish tray out for lunch and dinner, Mote could count on eating something pickled at nearly every Japanese meal.

Numerous expressions of hospitality and an enduring connection to a “home place” were other similarities she noticed. Mote was “pretty

much bowled over” when she learned about Obon, or the Buddhist “Festival of the Dead,” because it sounded so much like the religious camp meeting she had attended every summer in Georgia since she was in her mother’s womb. Obon in Japan and camp meeting in Georgia are annual gatherings of extended family, drawn together to honor the dead and celebrate the living with food, games, festivities, and spiritual renewal. They even occur in the same season—late summer. Obon takes place during three days in mid-August, and

camp meeting lasts a week—historically in late August—although some camp meetings have changed to late July to accommodate changes in local school schedules.

“As I listened to people talk about their Obon activities—going home; staying under one roof with members of multiple generations; invoking the spirits of the ancestors; storytelling; playing traditional games; preparing and enjoying traditional foods; gathering at local

temples for the bon dancing; and observing the long-lived customs of extended family groups and of the larger community—I heard the stuff of camp meeting,” said Mote.

She channeled her fascination into a comparative study of Obon and the evangelical Protestant camp meeting tradition for the MARIAL



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