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music BY JOHN GINN

Drums and Spirits

Obon Festival provides an evening of Japanese culture.

In Buddhist and Shinto tradition, the annual Obon festival is one of the most important times of the year. In Japan the annual three-day observance can bring much daily activity to a halt as people pray that the souls of their ancestors are at peace.

In Eugene, as in Japan, another aspect of the festival is pure celebration. Not only are the ancestor spirits assumed to be at rest, but they might even be persuaded to come for a visit.

"During Obon, we dance and invite the spirits of our ancestors to dance with us," Seiko Kikuta said. An expert in Japanese dance forms, Kikuta is now in her 17th year as dance coordinator for Eugene's annual Japanese-American Obon and Taiko Drumming Festival. For several

make it as easy as possible for people to join in."

Participants can dance in memory of their own ancestors or just for fun. For those fearful of treading clumsily on a religious rite,

Kikuta said, "In Japan, this is a religious observance, but in Eugene we do this to help new generations and others to understand Japanese culture."

While dancing is encouraged, it is certainly not mandatory, and the festival offers other attractions. There will be games for children, arts and craft booths, food booths and performances of Taiko drumming.

For some practitioners, Taiko drumming itself is almost a religious act. The drum is thought to be imbued with a spirit, and the part of the drummer is to



**JAPANESE AMERICAN
OBON AND TAIKO
DRUMMING FESTIVAL**
5-9 pm • Sat. July 29
Alton Baker Park • FREE

'During Obon, we dance and invite the spirits of our ancestors to dance with us.' — Seiko Kikuta

weeks, she has been rehearsing a troupe of dancers for the festival, but come performance time, she hopes the audience won't just stand by watching the results of all her work.

"Audience participation is strongly encouraged," Kikuta said. "The steps are very simple and repetitive. It shouldn't take long for people to get the basics down, and even if they don't get it exactly right, dancing is more important than the steps. We want to

become one with the drum and express and free its spirit. It's an inherently dramatic and complex art form built out of percussive beats and telling silences.

Between the drumming and the dancing, the atmosphere is right for an evening of family entertainment. And while the origins of the festival might be religious, surely all people could benefit by taking time to consider the family members who have come before. **EW**

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