

Kasagi, found on Oregon shores, heading back soon to Shinto shrine in Japan

By Maileen Hamto
The Asian Reporter

In the spring of 2013, two large wooden structures washed ashore on the Oregon coast: one in Oceanside and another about 120 miles south, in Florence. When staff from the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department responded to the reports, and eventually collected the structures, they knew the beach finds had significant cultural and historical importance.

Today, the structures — known as *kasagi* — are on display at the Portland Japanese Garden as part of a special exhibit telling their unique and compelling story of hope and determination. The *kasagi* are on their final days in Portland, before being sent back to their home shrine.

The large painted pieces of wood are among tons of debris that began washing ashore on the Oregon coast following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that affected coastal towns in northern Japan. The 9.0-magnitude earthquake that spurred the tsunami was the most powerful on record in Japan. Many lives were lost, and entire villages were claimed by the sea. Four years after the devastation, coastal townships continue the long journey toward rebuilding and renewal.

In Oregon, the found structures sparked a curious hunt for their origins. Measuring 16 feet long and painted red, parks staff alerted local media about the pieces. As photos and footage of the found debris became public, the story caught the attention of Portland Japanese Garden curator Sadafumi Uchiyama.

Steeped in knowledge about Japanese culture and history, Uchiyama identified the artifacts as *kasagi* — crossbeams — which are part of a *torii*, a traditional gate that marks the entrance of spaces sacred to followers of Shintoism, the indigenous religion of Japan.

For some time, the *kasagi* found a home in the garage of Dorie Vollum, a member of the garden's board of trustees. Together with Stephen Bloom, CEO of the Portland Japanese Garden, Vollum and Uchiyama began a focused effort to learn more about



(Photo: Sadafumi Uchiyama)



(AR Photo: Maileen Hamto)



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GATES OF HOPE. A display currently on view at the Portland Japanese Garden — “Kasagi: Gates of Hope” — describes the incredible story of the return of two *kasagi* to Japan. The two large wooden structures, which washed away in the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, were discovered on the Oregon coast in 2013. The *kasagi* are on display through August 10, before they are returned to Japan. Visitors are invited to write messages on origami paper (right photo) to send off the *kasagi* in a proper way. Pictured at top left is the first *kasagi* that arrived on Oregon shores, in its original location in Japan, in a photo taken in 2009. Pictured at bottom left is writing found on the second *kasagi*.

the origins of the *kasagi*.

The search eventually led Uchiyama and Vollum to visit three prefectures in the Tohoku region. Together, they met with leaders, talked to the press, and showed photos of the *kasagi* to cab drivers and hotel and restaurant workers. Uchiyama said one of their connections helped establish the provenance of the *kasagi*. They learned that the structures were part of a shrine in Hachinohe, a coastal fishing village hit directly by the tsunami.

Uchiyama connected with Toshimi Takahashi, who originally dedicated the *kasagi* in 1988. Takahashi said he watched the tsunami wash away the entire torii

gate. He said he wasn't surprised to be contacted by U.S.-based museum curators looking to reinstate the *kasagi* to their home shrine. In 1898, a devastating tsunami hit Hachinohe and washed away statues from the same shrine. Ninety years later, the statues washed back up on the shores of Japan and were returned to where they now stand.

“This shrine shows enormous resilience and recovery, calling back all of its lost elements,” Takahashi said.

More than four years after being swept away, the *kasagi* are on their way home. Pacific Lumber & Shipping and Yamato Transport U.S.A. donated transportation

to return the *kasagi* to Hachinohe, where they will be repaired and restored.

“It was quite a momentous discovery to find where the *kasagi* belonged,” Uchiyama said. “And, it is a great privilege to be able to return them to their rightful place.”

In Portland, there is still time to view the *kasagi*, which are on display through August 10 at the Portland Japanese Garden, located at 611 S.W. Kingston Avenue in Portland. At the exhibit, visitors are invited to write messages on origami paper to send off the *kasagi* in a proper way. Students from local Japanese immersion programs will fold the collected messages into paper cranes, which will be sent with the *kasagi* to Hachinohe. To learn more, call (503) 223-1321 or visit <www.japanesegarden.com>.

Wing part could help solve what happened to MH370

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Ocean. Last year, a man lost his boat off the Western Australia coast after it overturned in rough seas. Eight months later, the boat turned up off the French island of Mayotte, west of Madagascar — 4,600 miles from where it disappeared.

The discovery is unlikely to alter the seabed search, said Australian Transport Safety Bureau chief commissioner Martin Dolan, who is heading up the hunt. Dolan said search resources would be better spent continuing the seabed search with sonar and video for wreckage rather than reviving a surface search for debris if the part proved to be from Flight 370.

If the part is confirmed to belong to Flight 370, it could provide valuable clues to investigators trying to figure out what caused the aircraft to vanish in the first place, said Jason Middleton, an aviation professor at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. The nature of the damage to the debris could help indicate

whether the plane broke up in the air or when it hit the water, and how violently it did so, he said.

The barnacles attached to the part could also help marine biologists determine roughly how long it has been in the water, he said.

But the sister of a Flight 370 passenger says she is skeptical of the new find.

“It has been more than one year, and now they claim to have found debris of MH370 on an island? We don't accept this. We do not believe what they claim. The finding does not constitute anything,” Dai Shuqin told The AP days after the discovery. Her sister, Dai Shuling, and five family members were on the plane.

Over the past 16 months, hopes have repeatedly been raised and then dashed that the plane, or parts of the plane, had been found. In the end, none of them were from Flight 370.

Kristen Gelineau in Sydney, Rod McGuirk in Canberra, Australia, Joan Lowy in Washington, Lori Hinnant and Greg Keller in Paris, and Edith M. Lederer at the United Nations contributed to this report.

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