

Johana Hikiyama Festival

The Johana Hikiyama Festival takes place annually on May 4 and 5 in the town of Johana, now part of the city of Nanto. It features a procession of six large floats carrying sacred statues through the streets. The Johana Hikiyama Festival is registered as one of the “Yama, Hoko, Yatai float festivals in Japan” on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

The town of Johana was founded after Zentokuji, a Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land) temple in Fukumitsu, was relocated to the area in 1559. Markets and other businesses soon sprang up around the temple, and Johana became a temple town. By 1693, the population of Johana had reached over 3,000 people and a proper town had been established. During the Edo period (1603–1868), the silk textile business in Johana developed under the patronage of the Kaga domain, and sales of high-quality silk were expanded into other regions, including Kyoto and present-day Tokyo. Cultural exchange also took place with these cities, bringing a new focus to Johana’s literary works, scholarship, and visual art.

The Johana Hikiyama Festival is held at Johana Shinmeigu Shrine, which was relocated from a nearby village in 1574. The shrine first celebrated the festival in 1685, but its current form came about while Johana was going through an economic recession during the early eighteenth century. To turn the economy around, the people of Johana began using the festival to pay their respects to deities in the hope of good fortune. A festival was held in 1717 that included a portable shrine, a *kasaboko* (object that summons divine spirits from the heavens), and a lion dance. A few years later in 1724, *hikiyama* floats, which carried the statues of the gods, joined the festival. In the first half of the 1800s, *iori-uta* music and *iori-yatai* were incorporated into the festival. These floats were designed in the style of structures such as *ochaya* (establishments where guests were entertained by geisha in Kyoto). *Iori-uta* showcased the influence of music popular in the city of Edo (present-day Tokyo). Musicians inside the *iori-yatai* walk along with the parade while playing traditional songs with bamboo flutes and shamisen (three-stringed instruments). The *hikiyama* floats also became more extravagant, with

much effort placed on the production of new statues and decorative ornaments.

The festivities begin on the eve of the festival on May 4 with a viewing of its guardian deities (Gyouo, Ebisu, Daikokuten, Hotei, Kanu and Shuso, and Juro) at *yamayado*, homes where the statues of the deities are housed on the eve of the festival. The statues are brought out of their respective *yamayado* in the early morning of May 5 and placed on the *hikiyama* floats. The parade is led by a lion dance, followed by a *kenboko* apparatus used to appease evil spirits, affixed with a long, vertical banner; eight *kasaboko*; *shijinki* (flags representing the deities that govern the cardinal directions and corresponding constellations), and three portable shrines. Following this procession, the *hikiyama* floats and the musical *iori-yatai* floats complete the parade. During the evening, the floats from the festival are illuminated by lanterns.

The *hikiyama* floats crafted by local artisans are 6 meters high. They are rolled through the streets of Johana by groups of men who guide and turn the large wheels. The wheels are made of Japanese zelkova (*keyaki*), and they make a distinctive screeching noise—said to ward off evil spirits—as they move through the streets.