

Origin of Aomori Nebuta Festival

The origins of the Nebuta Festival are not entirely clear, but it is thought to have developed from a local tradition called Nemuri Nagashi. This custom involved walking outside on a couple of nights in early July carrying leaves and lanterns, and cleansing one's body of the fatigue and drowsiness of summer by passing those negative states onto these items. The leaves were then cast into rivers and the ocean on the seventh day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar (which was used in Japan until 1872).

The timing of the Nemuri Nagashi overlapped with the Tanabata Festival, a celebration of the stars introduced to Japan from China during the Nara period (710–794). The simple lanterns used in the original ritual were eventually replaced with more elaborate ones called Nebuta, into which tiredness and evil spirits were expelled before they were set afloat, and the custom came to be called Nebuta Nagashi instead. Over time, Nebuta Nagashi developed into the Nebuta Festival, which has been celebrated in some form since at least the first half of the eighteenth century. The early days of the festival featured box-shaped lanterns, while large, figure-shaped floats first appeared in the early 1800s.

The current Nebuta style with colossal floats was established after World War II, which is also when the lighting inside the figures was switched from candles to electric lamps. The floats have continued to grow more elaborate over the years, in part due to the increasing popularity of the festival among tourists. In 1980, the Nebuta Festival was designated an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property of Japan. Its Nebuta Nagashi origins live on in the last evening's Bay Parade, when the Nebuta floats are paraded on boats in Aomori Bay.