

## **Local Culture in Asakusa and the Sanja Festival**

The old Japanese word Edokko, meaning “child of Edo,” used to refer to someone born and raised in Edo—the old name for present-day Tokyo. However, the contemporary meaning refers to someone with the heart and soul of a true Tokyoite, although a concrete definition for what makes an Edokko is hard to pin down. Similarly, lifelong residents of Asakusa refer to themselves as “Asakusakko.” Of course, Asakusa became part of Edo and is part of Tokyo, but the people of Asakusa have always had a strong sense of local pride.

Although now it is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Japan’s capital, Asakusa is first and foremost a residential area. The 44 small neighborhoods of which the district is composed are bound together by a sense of community and friendship that forms the heart of residents’ identity as Asakusakko. Local people have a deep respect for their traditions and a modern outlook for the future. They have a palpable sense of pride in Asakusa, and although they enjoy a rowdy celebration, they never forget their love and responsibility toward their hometown.

The physical and spiritual heart of this community is the Sensoji Temple complex and nearby Asakusa Jinja Shrine. The shrine was built to honor and deify as kami (Shinto deities) the three founders of Sensoji Temple: the two brothers who found a golden statue of the Buddhist deity Kannon in their nets while fishing on the Sumida River, and the village wise man who converted his dwelling into Sensoji Temple to house the sacred image. While Sensoji is a Buddhist temple, the shrine is Shinto, as indicated by the stone torii gate at the entrance to the sacred grounds. The main building on the site of Asakusa Jinja Shrine, which is a designated Important Cultural Property, was one of the few structures in the area that survived the firebombing of World War II.

The shrine sponsors one of the largest festivals in the area—indeed, in the entire city—the Sanja Festival. This celebration, which takes place annually on the weekend nearest May 18, is believed to have been held in some form for over 700 years. The festivities start on Friday with a grand procession around Sensoji, the Nakamise shopping street, and other streets, featuring Asakusa residents dressed in elaborate costumes and traditional garb, along with traditional music and dancing. In the evening, local residents parade through the streets carrying six portable shrines (*mikoshi*) adorned with lanterns on their shoulders in an event called *yomiya* (literally “the eve of the festival”). On Saturday, revelers gather behind the main building of Sensoji, carrying over 100

*mikoshi* from the 44 neighborhoods of Asakusa. People from each neighborhood carry their portable shrine to Asakusa Jinja Shrine to be blessed, and then return to their respective neighborhoods to celebrate. The main event takes place on Sunday, when Asakusa Shrine's three ornate *mikoshi*—each representing one of the founders of Sensoji Temple—are paraded through all of Asakusa's neighborhoods. Throughout the weekend, the festival attracts millions of visitors and local residents.

The Asakusakko are easy to spot in their festival garb as they parade the portable shrines around their neighborhoods. They are the ones who teach children the meaning behind the festival, and how to put on traditional clothes or carry the *mikoshi*. They are the ones who run the food stalls with their families and clean up once the festivities are over. By passing on the history and culture of their neighborhood, they are ensuring that future generations of Asakusakko will carry on their traditions.