

Ueno Tenjin Festival: Historical Background

Ueno Tenjin Shrine, also known as Sugawara Shrine, was founded over 400 years ago. Over the centuries, many of the shrine's various celebrations and customs were combined to become the modern Ueno Tenjin Festival. The current festival is made up of three parts: a procession of portable shrines called *mikoshi*, followed by a line of *oni* and nine pairs of floats. In Japanese folklore, *oni* are strong, imposing beings that resemble western ogres and demons and often represent natural forces.

The line of *oni* consists of two parts. The first is the En no Gyōja procession, which was included in the festival after the Iga lord Tōdō Takatora (1556–1630) made a miraculous recovery from a serious eye disease. Having heard that their lord was sick, the townsfolk made a pilgrimage to pray for his recovery on Mt. Ōmine (1,719 m), a holy site for ascetic followers of a religion called Shugendō. When the lord's health returned, he gave his subjects valuable Noh masks out of gratitude. The townsfolk began to wear the masks and act out the pilgrimage to Mt. Ōmine in memory of their lord's recovery. This tradition became known as the En no Gyōja procession in reference to the legendary ascetic monk En no Gyōja (634–706), the traditional founder of Shugendō. Today, the townsfolk wear detailed replicas of the original seventeenth-century masks.

The second part of the *oni* procession is named after Chinzei Hachirō Tametomo (1139–1170), a samurai who appears in many stories as a subduer of wicked *oni*. Tametomo's procession was incorporated into the Ueno Tenjin Festival during the late eighteenth century. The procession depicts him returning home triumphantly after a fierce battle.

The nine pairs of *danjiri* and *shirushi* floats that come at the end of the parade each represent a neighborhood in Iga. The small *shirushi* floats are decorated with symbols of their respective neighborhoods. The large, wheeled, wooden *danjiri* follow the *shirushi* and are each pulled by residents of their neighborhood as musicians play inside.