

Snow Country Culture

【Snow Country Events】

Tōkamachi Winter Market or “Chinkoro Market” (January 10, 15, 20, 25)

Midwinter markets have been held in Tōkamachi since the Edo period (1603–1867). The markets were ideal opportunities for both socializing and conducting business, and they drew in farmers from the surrounding mountains who came to sell their crops, homemade goods, and textiles for extra income. The winter market is also called the “*chinkoro* market” after the small, handmade figurines of puppies (or *chinkoro*, after the Japanese *Chin* dog) made of steamed rice-paste that were first sold at the market around the turn of the twentieth century. The puppy figurines became extremely popular, and figurines of rabbits and other auspicious animals are now sold as well. It is believed that the more cracks a small, handmade figurine develops over time, the luckier its owner will become.

Ōshirakura Baitō (Mid-January)

In January, villagers in Ōshirakura use straw and Japanese zelkova to build a *baitō*, a huge hut that is 10 meters tall and 8 meters in diameter. On January 14, the villagers gather inside and swap anecdotes about the year’s events. Afterward, the *baitō* is burned, and the shape of the flames is used to predict the crop conditions for the coming year. A tall, straight bonfire is a predictor of a good harvest.

Mukonage (January 15)

During this annual event, newlywed grooms are thrown down a snowy, 5-meter-long slope in Matsunoyama Onsen as a form of celebration. The origins of the ritual lie in vengeful acts sometimes taken against men from outside the village who married local women. The word *mukonage* literally means “groom-tossing.”

Suminuri (January 15)

Suminuri, which means “ash-smearing,” is held after the ceremonial burning of household New Year decorations at the shrine at Matsunoyama Onsen. Participants smear each other’s faces with a mixture of snow and soot from the fire to pray for health and family prosperity in the coming year.