

Boats in the Mountains

These floats, called *ofune* (“boats”), are a feature at festivals across the entire Azumino valley. While it is tempting to link these boat-shaped floats to the Azumi clan’s origins as nautical navigators, scholars have found no records that specifically tie the ship-themed celebrations to the ancient seafarers. Still, it is fascinating to wonder if the festivals come from attempts to please the gods by imitating life on the seas.

While the origins are shrouded in mystery, historical records as far back as 1689 reference the *ofune* and the wood used to make them. The floats are still constructed using traditional materials and intricate building methods. The frames are made of tree branches lashed together over a base of large logs and covered with brightly colored bunting. A stage is constructed on the deck of each *ofune*, featuring fantastically detailed dioramas of popular historical or legendary scenes. On one, which is displayed at a nearby museum, elaborately armored warriors charge with swords raised high. Horses rear in fright and waves crash against rocks as a battle rages. Another float features a princess surrounded by a forest and other visual props that create a vision of fantasy.

The floats are mounted on large wooden wheels. Lacking steering mechanisms, the massive, heavy structures must be hauled around corners as they are pushed and pulled through the streets.