

Rural Life with *Dosojin*

There are over 500 *dosojin* of all sizes, shapes, and quality in the Azumino valley. Some sit at forks in country roads, surrounded by rice fields, while others occupy corners of suburban neighborhoods. In the past, families would take newborns to pay their respects to the roadside gods, though this custom is rarely practiced today. Nonetheless, *dosojin* are a part of everyday life and are treated with great respect and care, even as they show weathering from years in the elements. Some people occasionally pause to say a simple prayer, while others leave small offerings, like coins or flowers.

Depending on the area, the *dosojin* play a central role in various neighborhood festivals, especially during New Year celebrations. One tradition still maintained in some 17 *dosojin* locations throughout Azumino involves building a tower from Japanese cypress wood and bamboo, some of them reaching 15 meters in height. These are decorated with colorful streamers, topped off with tree branches, and left standing for a week to 10 days before being dismantled.

In mid-January, some communities use *dosojin* sites for *sankuro* fire festivals in which by-then-obsolete New Year decorations and other items are piled into a cone-shaped tower and set on fire. At the end of winter and beginning of spring, children paint a few *dosojin* figures in bright colors, a striking contrast to their usual subdued appearance. Others are festooned with traditional decorations at Tanabata, the summer festival celebrating the annual meeting in the night sky of legendary, star-crossed lovers separated by the Milky Way. Azumino gets its fair share of snow in the winter, and some elders remember children building and playing in small, igloo-like huts known as *kamakura* beside the *dosojin* carvings (though this tradition is no longer practiced).

Children are always at the center of celebrations involving *dosojin*, which seems fitting given the deities' centuries-old role as protectors.