

Mifune Festival (Kumano Hayatama Taisha Annual Festival)

Kumano Hayatama Taisha, one of the three Kumano Grand Shrines (Kumano Sanzan), holds its annual Mifune Festival on October 16 at the estuary of the Kumano River. This boating festival can be traced back around 1,800 years and still retains the same ancient traditions. Its roots are thought to be based in the region's long history of shipbuilding.

During the festival, a portable shrine carrying the deity enshrined at Kumano Hayatama Taisha is transported to an ancient ritual site on a beautiful, red ceremonial vessel, called the *shinkosen*. The oarsman dances and chants in a ritual known as the "Hari Hari Dance," dedicated to the deity. The *shinkosen* is followed by a fleet of nine rowboats, each crewed by 11 people, who race 1.6 kilometers along the Kumano River and three times around Mifune Island. The portable shrine is then taken to the *otabisho*, the deity's resting point, which is a ritual site along the river.

In 1964, the festival was designated an Important Intangible Folk Culture Property of Japan.