

Kendama

Kendama, Japan's own version of the wooden cup-and-ball toy, has a long association with the Hiroshima area. Kendama is likely based on the sixteenth-century French bilboquet, a toy that involved catching a ball in a cup and may have been introduced to Japan via the Netherlands during the Edo period (1603–1867). At that time, Hiroshima's neighboring city, Hatsukaichi, was famous for its woodworking and carpentry, and was the main gateway for visitors to Itsukushima Shrine on the island of Miyajima. In the Meiji era (1868–1912), Hatsukaichi's woodworkers began producing kendama and other wooden toys to sell to passing pilgrims and tourists. Like their European counterparts, these early kendama were mostly just a single cup with a handle attached to a ball with string.

In 1918, a craftsman named Egusa Hamaji redesigned the toy with three cups, a handle, and a spike, creating the modern Japanese kendama. Hamaji named his toy "sun-and-moon ball" (*nichigetsu boru*), with the round ball representing the sun and the curved, crescent-shaped cups representing the moon. Since Hatsukaichi's woodworkers were famous across the country, Hamaji commissioned a local factory to produce his new toy. The city thus became the birthplace of the modern kendama.

At the peak of the toy's popularity in the 1970s, Hatsukaichi was turning out 400,000 kendama every year, accounting for 70 percent of Japan's total production. Although kendama are not as popular today, they are still made in Hatsukaichi, and the local government provides one to all first-grade students in the city. The Kendama World Cup was held in Hatsukaichi in 2014.