

## Island Life: Honensai and Hachigatsu Odori

Yearly festivals are the highlights of social life in the island communities, and are held according to *kyureki*, the traditional lunar calendar. One of the most representative—and anticipated—events is the Honensai, a festival held annually in late summer or early autumn to celebrate the past year’s harvest and pray for a good harvest in the coming year. The festivities are generally held at the village square, which usually has a *dohyo*, or sumo ring. A parade of boys and men of all ages makes its way through the village to the *myaa*, the sacred site where they dedicate their upcoming sumo bouts to the gods of the village. The parade continues on to the *dohyo*, where the sumo matches are held to the excited cheers of the villagers. All the men in the village are welcome to test their skill and strength. The other ceremonies in the festival, including dance performances, differ from village to village. Historically, the mountainous interior of the island limited communication and interaction between villages, which led each community to develop their own rites and rituals.

The Honensai often ends with a spirited *Hachigatsu Odori*, a dance that celebrates the harvest. These dances are held at different times over the summer, depending on the lunar calendar. They are performed by a ring of men and women, and the melody, lyrics, and dance steps are particular to each village. The songs are sung in the local dialect and are accompanied by the small drum called a *chijin*, along with high-pitched whistling. In the northern villages of Amami Oshima, the tempo increases as the dance goes on, while in the southern villages, the tempo remains the same throughout. At one time, the dancers would wind their way through the community, stopping to dance in gardens and open spaces, but today the event is usually held in the village center, where people bring food and drink to enjoy between dances.

There are other festivals held throughout the year on the island, and interested visitors should check with the tourist center about the event schedule.