

## Hodare Festival

This unusual, spirited fertility celebration draws its name from the *hodare*, a 2.2-meter-long penis made of cedar wood and weighing approximately 600 kilograms. *Hodare* has a double meaning: “the ripening of rice plants” and “male genitals.”

The festival takes place on the second Sunday of March in Shimoraiden, a village in the Tochio area on Nagaoka’s outskirts. Both expecting and would-be mothers participate in the event in hopes they will be blessed with healthy, happy children.

Other festivals in Japan center around phallic symbols, but Shimoraiden’s *hodare* is believed to be the largest. For most of the year, the *hodare* is kept in a shrine next to an 800-year-old cedar tree. According to local legend, this is a female tree, which originally had an adjacent male counterpart. However, a storm knocked down the male tree long ago, leading to a period of misfortune and low birth rates in the village. The villagers then fashioned the cedar *hodare* to replace the fallen male tree. Soon after that, the first Hodare Festival was held.

The event usually begins at 11 a.m. First, female residents of Tochio place strings of special beads as offerings to the *hodare* in the shrine. Next, expectant mothers come to the shrine to offer prayers. Once these rituals are complete, the *hodare* is ready to be brought out.

It takes a large group of men to lift the *hodare* from its shrine. They begin by tying ceremonial ropes around it. The ropes themselves weigh about 200 kilograms. The men then carry the *hodare* down the steps to the roadside, where they load it onto a portable shrine to be paraded up and down the street. Women may sit on the *hodare* or touch it for good luck. Only local residents can take part in the pre-parade shrine rituals, but any woman visiting the festival is welcome to participate in this part of the ceremony. Tradition holds that touching the *hodare* is the key to having a healthy baby.

The festival is not just for future mothers. Stalls selling food, trinkets, and game activities operate alongside the main ceremony. Younger visitors can enjoy *kujibiki* lotteries for prizes and the making of lucky *mochi* (sticky rice cakes). For adults, there are stalls selling alcoholic drinks, including *kajika-zake*, a kind of sake made with fish. Regular local sake and soft drinks are also available. In addition, visitors can enjoy the famous jumbo *aburage*, Tochio’s deep-fried tofu specialty. Penis-shaped novelty items are on sale as well. Another souvenir distinctive of the area is the Tochio Temari ball, a handmade ornament.

The Hodare Festival offers visitors an entertaining way to learn more about Japanese culture. It also gives insight into the local community and the events that bring people together in smaller, more isolated rural villages.

Shimoraiden is located approximately 30 minutes by car from Nagaoka Station.