

Komamiya Shrine: The Nichinan *Shan-shan Uma* Tradition

The many horse statues at Komamiya Shrine remind visitors of the important role these animals have played in local history. The area that is now Miyazaki Prefecture has been famous for horse breeding since at least the Nara period (710–794), and there have been a number of centers near Komamiya over the centuries. One of these, Tateishi which is approximately 4 kilometers from the shrine, is associated in local folklore with the tale of Jimmu, the legendary first emperor of Japan. In the story, a dragon god presents the young Jimmu with a horse named Tatsuishi, and the two become inseparable. When Jimmu grows up and departs his home village to become a great ruler, he has to leave his beloved mount behind. The two companions are said to have parted at Tateishi, which had a horse pasture until the Edo period (1603–1867).

The Ito family, daimyo lords of the Obi domain (the southern coastal region of present-day Miyazaki Prefecture), donated a horse to Komamiya Shrine every year as a symbol of their faith and patronage. During annual festivals, people from nearby villages would gather at the shrine to perform dances featuring horses and hold horse auctions. These events are said to have given birth to the *shan-shan uma* tradition, which is practiced throughout the present-day city of Nichinan in various forms and mainly involves newlyweds riding on elaborately decorated horses. The word *shan-shan* is thought to express the sound made by the bells that are attached to the horses' harness on such occasions.