

Kamo Festival (Aoi Festival)

Date: May 15th

The Kamo Festival is the most important annual festival of Kamigamo Jinja, held jointly with Kamomioya Jinja Shrine (Shimogamo Jinja) to pray for the peace and safety of the country and the well-being of the people. It is one of the three largest and most popular festivals in Kyoto alongside the Gion Festival (Gion Matsuri) in July and the Festival of the Ages (Jidai Matsuri) in October. On May 15th, spectators line the city streets to watch the grand procession of participants dressed in traditional attire of the Heian period (794–1185) travel from Kyoto Imperial Palace to Shimogamo Jinja and Kamigamo Jinja. The event is commonly known as the Aoi Festival (Aoi Matsuri) after the iconic decorations made of *aoi* (wild ginger) twisted around thin *katsura* tree branches. These ornaments adorn the two shrines and the festival participants' clothing, representing the ritual decorations from the legend that describes the origin of the Kamo Festival.

Festival Procession

The most important participants in the Kamo Festival procession are the *chokushi* (imperial messenger) and the honorary priestess (Saiodai). The *chokushi* wears elegant black robes, and the richly dressed Saiodai rides in a distinctive palanquin. Others represent various figures from the Heian court, such as military officials, supervisors of ritual offerings, musicians, dancers, noblewomen, ladies-in-waiting, and sacred maidens. Two decorated ox carts that were historically used to carry the highest-ranking participants, as well as large umbrellas topped with brightly colored flowers add to the festive atmosphere. The procession departs from Kyoto Imperial Palace at 10:30 a.m. and heads toward Shimogamo Jinja, where various rituals are conducted. After a short break, the procession continues to Kamigamo Jinja, arriving at approximately 3 p.m. The imperial messenger reads a special address to the shrine deity at the Hashidono Hall, which is followed by a sacred dance and other rituals. Finally, riders on horseback gallop from the first to the second torii gate of the shrine, bringing the festival to a close.

Origins of Kamo Festival

During the reign of Emperor Kinmei (509–571), storms and floods ravaged the country, making it difficult to grow crops. The emperor turned to divination, and the cause of the disasters was identified as the wrath of the deity Kamo Wakeikazuchi no Okami. In order to appease the deity, the emperor dispatched a *chokushi* messenger to Kamigamo Jinja

and held rites inspired by the legend of Kamo Wakeikazuchi no Okami and his descent to the sacred Mt. Koyama. After the festivities, the weather calmed and plentiful harvests returned. This is considered to be the origin on the Kamo Festival.

History of Kamo Festival

According to shrine records, Kamigamo Jinja has been holding the Kamo Festival since the sixth century. In 807, not long after Kyoto became the capital of Japan, the Kamo Festival became a *chokusai*, a ceremony officially supported by the imperial court in which a *chokushi* messenger presents offerings and prayers on behalf of the emperor. Throughout the centuries, the festival procession was held or cancelled depending on the state of affairs at court, but the religious rites at Kamigamo Jinja were performed each year regardless. In the postwar period, the lavish imperial messenger procession was revived in 1953, and the segment that includes the Saiodai and her retinue was added in 1956.

Saiodai and Saio

The role of the honorary priestess performed by the Saiodai is based on the historical tradition of Saio priestesses that began over 1,200 years ago. In 810, it became custom for an unmarried princess to serve as a priestess at Kamigamo Jinja. She was chosen by divination and took part in the Kamo Festival and other rituals for the duration of her tenure. The Saio tradition reflected the reverence for the shrine deity held by the imperial court and lasted for approximately 400 years, but had to be discontinued in 1212 due to the high cost it entailed.

In the modern day, the Saiodai is chosen from unmarried young women of Kyoto. The Saiodai fulfills the duties once carried out by the Saio, taking part in the Gyokei purification ceremony on May 4th, the Kamo Festival on May 15th, the Karasuzumo ritual on September 9th, and the Kamo Kyokusui no En event in April.