

Kamo Kurabeuma Horse Racing Ritual

Date: May 5th

The Kamo Kurabeuma is a horse racing ritual held at Kamigamo Jinja ahead of the grand Kamo Festival (also known as the Aoi Festival) that takes place on May 15th. After a series of purification rites and prayers, skilled riders in traditional *bugaku* court dance attire gallop at full speed down the track, shouting and urging their horses on toward the goal. The dynamic Kamo Kurabeuma race serves as an offering to the deity Kamo Wakeikazuchi no Okami, asking for peace throughout the country and an abundant harvest.

History

It is said that Emperor Horikawa (1079–1107) presented a horse race that was customarily performed at Kyoto Imperial Palace to the deity of Kamigamo Jinja in 1093. The event became known as the Kamo Kurabeuma and has been held at the shrine ever since. It is a registered Intangible Folk Cultural Property of Kyoto in recognition of its long history and religious significance.

Preparation Rituals

A 200-meter race track is specially prepared on the left side of the path between the first and the second torii gates of Kamigamo Jinja. On the day of the event, the deity Kamo Wakeikazuchi no Okami is transferred to a temporary enshrinement site beside the track to oversee the festivities. Various rites are then conducted to purify the participants and pray for peace, good harvest, and the safe completion of the race. This includes drinking ceremonial *sake*, offerings of sacred *sakaki* branches, and riding the horses in sun and moon shapes, which reflects the yin-yang philosophy adopted by Kamigamo Jinja since ancient times.

Kamo Kurabeuma Horse Race

The Kamo Kurabeuma starts at approximately 2 p.m. Although the ritual involves horse racing, the format differs considerably from the modern sport. A formal inspection of the health and strength of both riders and horses takes place in advance, so that participants can be divided into two evenly matched teams. The Sakata team wears bright vermilion attire, and the Ukata team is dressed in brown and black.

In a typical race, all riders start from the same line and strive to reach the finish first. In contrast, Kamo Kurabeuma riders compete one-on-one and begin from a staggered position a short distance apart. The competition is comprised of about five rounds, where each pair of riders strives for victory for their respective team and the watching deity. The winner of each round is determined by two judges based on whether the distance between the horses has widened or shortened. The Sakata team starts the ritual with one win awarded by default in honor of its victory at the first Kamo Kurabeuma held in 1093. It is said that the harvest will be particularly bountiful if the Sakata team is victorious at the end of the ritual.