

## Nagoshi no Oharae Purification Ritual

Date: June 30th

Many Shinto shrines hold purification rites at the end of June to cleanse impurities accumulated over the first half of the year and pray for good health in the remaining half. Kamigamo Jinja is known for a particular style of purification that involves transferring impurities from a person to a paper doll called *hitogata*. After sunset on June 30th, during the Nagoshi no Oharae (Great Summer Purification) ritual, shrine priests send the papers floating down the Nara no Ogawa Stream from the torch-lit Hashidono Hall, accompanied by the rhythmic chanting of prayers.

Several rituals take place at Kamigamo Jinja on June 30th. During the day, priests pass through a large ring made of reeds, purify their bodies at the Hashidono, and proceed to present offerings and prayers to the deity Kamo Wakeikazuchi no Okami at the Honden (Main Sanctuary). When the Nagoshi no Oharae begins at 8 p.m., the priests once again gather at the Hashidono. The scene is lit by braziers that cast firelight over the running water, and the sound of traditional musical instruments reverberates through the shrine grounds. A reciter steps forward to read a *waka* poem about summer purification at Kamigamo Jinja written by Fujiwara Ietaka (1158–1237), a court noble and poet: In the evening / When the wind rustles the oaks / At Nara no Ogawa / It is the ablutions / That are the only sign it is still summer!

Two priests then sit at the edge of the Hashidono with a box of assembled *hitogata* paper dolls and rapidly swipe them one after the other into the stream below, while others chant a purification prayer. As the papers float away, they are believed to take each person's impurities with them. A priest wielding a branch of the sacred *sakaki* tree proceeds to purify the people who gathered to watch the ceremony. After a recitation of another *waka* poem about summer purification, the priests throw their own *hitogata* into the stream and depart, leaving the dying flames in the braziers flickering in the night.

In order to submit *hitogata* for the purification ceremony, people write their name and age on the paper dolls and then pass them over the left side, right side, and center of the chest, completing the process by releasing a breath onto the paper. The *hitogata* thus become vessels for the supplicants' impurities, and when the papers are washed away, they symbolically take the impurities with them. In recent years, car-shaped papers were

introduced for those who want to pray for traffic safety. *Hitogata* can be submitted to Kamigamo Jinja in advance from mid-May to the end of June. On the day of the Nagoshi no Oharae, they are accepted until the scattering ceremony is over.

The same ritual is performed at the end of December to cleanse the impurities accumulated since July and to pray for good health in the coming year.