

Karasuzumo Wrestling and Choyo Ritual

Date: September 9th

One of the most unusual festivals held at Kamigamo Jinja is Karasuzumo (“crow sumo wrestling”), which honors the shrine’s ancient connection to crows. In one of the rituals, men wearing white clothing and black caps ceremonially imitate crows, and in another, neighborhood children compete in sumo wrestling as an offering to the shrine deity. The Choyo Ritual (“double-nine rite”), a seasonal ceremony taking place on the same day, prominently features chrysanthemum flowers, which have an auspicious meaning and are an important element in Japanese culture.

Choyo Ritual

The ninth day of the ninth month is the date for the last of five traditional festivals that mark the changing of the seasons. It has long been associated with chrysanthemums, which symbolize longevity and protection from misfortune. At the imperial palace, it was once the custom to wash oneself using cotton wool dampened with chrysanthemum dew and to drink *sake* with chrysanthemum petals on this day. At Kamigamo Jinja, this tradition is celebrated with the Choyo Ritual, also known as the Chrysanthemum Ritual. At 10 a.m., a procession of Shinto priests heads to the Honden (Main Sanctuary), where they present offerings and chrysanthemum flowers to the deity Kamo Wakeikazuchi no Okami. This rite is one of the few where the doors of the main sanctuary are opened and a high-ranking priest goes inside to place offerings on the sacred altar for the enshrined deity.

Crow-Mimicking Ritual

Festivities continue in front of the Hosodono Hall and the *tatesuna* sand cones that symbolize the sacred Mt. Koyama. Before the Karasuzumo wrestling begins, two men dressed in white and wearing black lacquered caps perform a rite to purify the temporary sumo ring and pray for victory for the wrestlers they represent. Mimicking the movement of crows, they hop nine times toward the *tatesuna*, on which they prop a bow, arrows, and a sword. The men then sit down and take turns imitating crow calls, crying out nine times. The origin of this ritual is attributed to the ancient legend that connects Kamigamo Jinja to crows. It is said that the divine grandfather of Kamo Wakeikazuchi no Okami took the form of a three-legged crow (*yatagarasu*) to serve as a guide for Emperor Jinmu, the legendary first emperor of Japan.

Karasuzumo Wrestling

Boys from the neighborhoods around Kamigamo Jinja are divided into two teams and compete in one-on-one sumo bouts to entertain the shrine deity and the Saiodai, the honorary priestess who watches the contest from the Hosodono Hall. The Karasuzumo is considered to be rooted in the tradition of holding sumo wrestling matches as an offering for the deities before the rice harvest begins.

Chrysanthemum Sake

Once the Karasuzumo wrestling matches are over, the day's festivities are concluded with ceremonial *sake* that is offered to people who have come to witness the rituals. It contains yellow chrysanthemum petals and is believed to bring long life and good fortune. Shrine officials pour chrysanthemum *sake* into small ceramic cups using gilded ladles, and everyone of drinking age is welcome to partake in this ancient custom.