

Yokote's Okuribon Festival

For over 300 years, Yokote's Okuribon Festival has been held on August 15 and 16 as a rite of remembrance for the dead. On the first day, residents of the town gather to perform a traditional *bon odori* folk dance. This is followed on the second day by the Yakatabune Kuridashi ceremony, in which large, straw-clad boats called *yakatabune* are taken down to the Yokote River to honor the spirits of the dead.

Yokote's Okuribon Festival began as a memorial service for the hundreds of thousands of lives lost during the three great famines that struck the country during the Edo period (1603–1867). In remembrance of those who were lost, residents of the Yanagimachi neighborhood prepared a large straw boat to send down the Yokote River. The practice spread to other neighborhoods, and it continues to this day. On the second day of the festival, the boats are lined up by the Yokote River to send off the spirits of the departed.

Each of the *yakatabune* used in the ceremony is prepared by the residents and shopkeepers of a different neighborhood of Yokote. Residents spend as much as a month adding the straw hull and fittings to large boat frames that are reused each year. The completed boats are displayed during the *bon odori* festival before being pulled down to the river, where the spirit-sending ceremony takes place. Afterward, the boats are brought back to Janosaki Bridge, where they are rammed together two at a time as the crowd cheers and fireworks explode overhead.