

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 and communion with the deceased. The festival is preceded by the Nemuri Nagashi, an event in which local children carry straw boats decorated with candles to the Yokote River. There on the riverbank, they play *taiko* drums and set out floating lanterns. This practice is said to have originated as a way of dispelling (*nagashi*) the drowsiness (*nemuri*) brought on by the summer heat, which would otherwise leave the townsfolk open to attack by malevolent spirits. On August 15, the townspeople gather for a traditional *bon odori* dance, followed on August 16 by the Yakatabune Kuridashi. Large, straw-clad boats called *yakatabune*, which can weigh as much as 800 kilograms, are taken down to the river, where a ceremony is held for the spirits of the dead.

History of Okuribon

The summer festival of Obon, which is held throughout Japan, originated as a Buddhist memorial service. Yokote's version, the Okuribon Festival, started as a memorial organized by the residents of the Yanagimachi neighborhood of Yokote during the Edo period (1603–1867). During this period, the country was struck by three great famines that led to a sharp increase in the cost of rice and the deaths of many hundreds of thousands of people. In remembrance of the many souls lost during these famines, the residents of Yanagimachi launched a straw boat down the Yokote River. Eventually, other neighborhoods in the city began to build their own boats, and the practice continues to this day in the form of the Yakatabune Kuridashi. The *yakatabune* are arranged in the same location as the children's smaller boats during the Nemuri Nagashi, after which a Buddhist priest performs a spirit-sending-off ceremony (*mitama-okuri*). Although the large boats are no longer sent down the river, the lights from the small floating lanterns released during Nemuri Nagashi are reminiscent of the practices of the Edo period.

The Boat-Ramming (*Butsuke-ai*) Ceremony

Each of the *yakatabune* that take part in the ceremony is prepared by the residents and shopkeepers of a different neighborhood of Yokote. While the boat frames are reused from previous festivals, every year the residents must fashion new straw hulls and fittings, a process that takes up to a month. Each of the participating neighborhoods builds a *yakatabune*, which must be carried from its home neighborhood to the dry

riverbed of the Yokote River. On August 15, the boats are lined up during the *bon odori* so that visitors can see them up close. On August 16, the boats are pulled down to the river for the sending-off ceremony. This is followed by the “boat-ramming” (*butsuke-ai*) ceremony, which has become the highlight of the Okuribon Festival. The boats are brought back to the bridge, where they square off in pairs and are rammed against each other at the nose. Representatives from each neighborhood remain aboard the boats as they smash together, shouting and waving as fireworks go off overhead.