

Yokote's Winter Festival

Yokote's Winter Festival is celebrated each year on February 15, 16, and 17. The lunar calendar was in use in Japan until 1872, and the festival commemorates the first full moon of the first lunar month. The first two days are a celebration of *kamakura*, large snow domes that are furnished with woven mats, a small brazier, and an altar to the kami of water. *Kamakura* containing small shrines are built in different parts of the city, and miniature versions cover the ground below Janosaki Bridge. On the last day of the festival, specially decorated staves called *bonden* are carried 3.5 kilometers through the city to Asahiokayama-jinja Shrine as an offering for a safe and prosperous year.

***Kamakura* (Snow Domes)**

Kamakura have a history of over 400 years, and their contemporary domed shape is a blend of two New Year's traditions that originated among the town's warrior class and merchant class, respectively. In the early 1900s, *kamakura* were largely built by individual households in front of their own homes for the sake of their children. Today, the *kamakura* for the Winter Festival are built by professional craftsmen. Modern *kamakura* are much sturdier than their predecessors; they are typically three meters tall and can remain standing for weeks. The builders pile snow into a tall dome shape, then leave it to freeze and solidify for two to three days. Afterward, they spend half a day digging out the interior and forming the alcove. Around 80 full-size *kamakura* are built and displayed for the festival, and the miniature *kamakura* that cover the riverbed below Janosaki Bridge number in the thousands.

***Bonden* (Decorated Staves)**

On the second and third day of the festival, decorated staves called *bonden* are carried through the city and presented as an offering at Asahiokayama-jinja Shrine. *Bonden* are physical objects that temporarily house the spirits of kami, but they are also fancifully decorated representations of the groups that made them. Each *bonden* is constructed by a different neighborhood of the city or by a local company. Other cities in Akita also have *bonden* festivals, but Yokote's *bonden* are distinguished by two things: their large size—they can be up to 5 meters high and weigh as much as 30 kilograms—and the ornate zodiac animals or dolls that cover the top of each staff.

On February 16, a contest to judge the *bonden* on the basis of their design and craftsmanship is held near the city office. The following day, each *bonden* is carried to

Asahiokayama-jinja Shrine by a relay of participants who take turns bringing it up the steep mountain roads that lead to the shrine. At the entrance to the shrine precincts, the men carrying the *bonden* jostle against one another while trying to force their way through the shrine gates, which are usually crowded with other participants. Finally, the *bonden* are presented in the main hall of the shrine, where prayers for a bountiful harvest, prosperous business, and the safety of people's households are made on behalf of the entire community.