

The Rich History of *Kamakura*, Yokote's Traditional Snow Domes

Snow structures called *kamakura* have been built in the area of Akita Prefecture for at least 400 years. However, they were not always the gently rounded domes for which the prefecture is now known. Records of early *kamakura* made in the city of Akita during the Edo period (1603–1867) show square, roofless structures decorated with banners, while records from Yokote describe snow structures that more closely resembled the dome shapes that are common in Akita Prefecture today. *Kamakura* have taken different shapes and served different purposes through the centuries, but their connection to local traditions has remained strong.

Early Forms of *Kamakura*

The oldest records concerning *kamakura* depict the children of samurai families running around square structures with banners and New Year's ornaments. The children made offerings and sang songs wishing for a good harvest and the protection of the family. In these records, the structures were referred to as *yukishiro* ("snow castles") or *yukikabe* ("snow walls"). However, the decorations found on the snow structures and the songs sung about them featured the word *kamakura*, and the structures themselves came to be known by that name. In Yokote as well, children of samurai built *yukikabe*-style *kamakura*. Children from merchant families, in comparison, built small snow domes next to the wells and rivers of the city, where they presented offerings and made prayers to the kami of water. After the samurai class was abolished in the late nineteenth century, their practices surrounding *kamakura* largely ceased. In the Taishō era (1912–1926), the creation of *kamakura* in Yokote shifted away from worship of the kami of water and became a ceremony mostly reserved for children, who would play in the snow structures and collect offerings of money and mochi for the small altars inside.

Modern *Kamakura*

Prior to modern times, *kamakura* were typically made from the piles of snow that had fallen from the roofs of buildings. As a result, the structures were small and did not form perfect domes. In 1959, the city established dome-shaped *kamakura* as the standard, but as the streets gradually became crowded with automobiles, the city encouraged the practice of building miniature *kamakura* instead. Currently, large snow domes for the Winter Festival are constructed by specialized artisans. They collect about 20 metric tons of snow to make the structures, which each stand 3 meters tall with walls about 70 centimeters thick. Inside the *kamakura* is an altar for offerings to the water

god, woven mats, cushions, and a brazier. Children use the brazier to grill sweet mochi rice cakes and warm *amaekko* (the local name for *amazake*, a fermented rice drink), which they offer to passersby with a cry of “Please come inside!” (*Haitte-tanse!*)