

Yokote's Traditional *Bonden* Procession

On February 17, the final day of Yokote's Winter Festival, a procession of men carrying massive, elaborately decorated wooden staves called *bonden* gathers in front of Yokote City Hall. From there, the procession makes its way 3.5 kilometers southeast, to Asahiokayama-jinja Shrine. As the men carrying the *bonden* pass through the gates of the shrine, the newcomers are pushed back by those who have already entered the precincts. This leads to shoving matches that grow more intense as the *bonden* are carried closer to the main hall. Most of the *bonden*, which can weigh as much as 30 kilograms, are battered and falling apart by the time they arrive. At the main hall of the shrine, each group makes an offering of the cloth that hangs from the *bonden* as a prayer for a safe and prosperous year. In exchange, participants receive a paper talisman (*ofuda*) that they take back to their neighborhood or business for safekeeping.

The *Bonden* Competition

The day before the *bonden* are offered at the shrine, they are brought to the city hall to be judged in a competition. Neighborhoods and businesses are encouraged to participate, but they must adhere to strict guidelines in constructing the body and decorations of their *bonden*. These guidelines provide details on the required height of the wooden staff, the height of the decorations at its top, the length of the cloth that hangs from the staff, and even the color, thickness, and direction in which the *bonden*'s "headband" (*hachimaki*) is twisted. Although the overall structure of the *bonden* must follow the guidelines, each group has some freedom of expression regarding the decorations. Some follow a more traditional design based on zodiac animals or other New Year's decorations, while others opt for more modern designs based on sporting events or fictional characters. Crowds at the Winter Festival cheer and shout when as many as 40 different full-sized *bonden* are unveiled at the city office alongside decorated bales of rice (*ebisutawara*) and smaller *bonden* created by the city's children.