

## **History and Origin of *Bonden***

*Bonden* are ritual objects that have been made and displayed in Yokote for over 300 years. *Bonden* are deeply rooted in Shinto belief and are used to house the spirits of kami when they descend to earth. Typically, *bonden* consist of wooden staves approximately 4 meters in length decorated with paper streamers and other ornamentation.

### ***Bonden* as Shinto Ritual Objects**

According to historical documents, *bonden* originated as religious objects called *heisoku*, wooden wands that are used in Shinto rituals. *Heisoku* were also referred to as *bode*, and practitioners of Shugendō, a form of mountain asceticism that is rooted in Shinto, combined the term *bode* with the name of their guardian deity Daibontenō to create the word *bonden*.

Modern *bonden* are much more elaborately decorated than the *heisoku* from which they originated. The tradition of offering them at Asahiokayama-jinja Shrine is believed to have begun in 1845, from a great hunt held on the sixteenth day of the new year by Tomura Jūdayū VIII (1818–1880), the keeper of Yokote Castle. The hunting party included many men from the local fire brigade, and while returning to the castle, they stopped at Asahiokayama-jinja Shrine to pray for safety from fires. The firemen had brought along their large firemen's standards, known as *matoi*, which were used to rally firemen to the source of a fire. *Matoi* are essentially long poles with paper streamers, and they strongly resemble large *heisoku*. During their prayer, the firefighters raised their *matoi* before the shrine's gates. According to local lore, the size and shape of the unusually large *bonden* used in Yokote's Winter Festival were directly influenced by the firemen's standards used during that hunting trip over 150 years ago, and a *bonden* competition is held each year on the same day as the great hunt.

### ***Bonden* in the Winter Festival**

The *bonden* displayed during the Winter Festival competition come in a variety of designs, each of which is created by the individual neighborhood or company it represents. Some groups follow traditional designs, with elements such as pagodas, altars, or the zodiac animal of the year, while other groups incorporate modern design motifs such as sports mascots. Regardless of the motif, participants seeking to have their *bonden* displayed must follow strict specifications regarding its shape, dimensions, and

composition.

First, the *bonden*'s pole must be a total of 4 meters long. On top of the pole, there is a bamboo basket 90 centimeters across, from which hang 270-centimeter strips of cloth called *sagari*. Next are the *shide*, paper streamers used on the *heisoku* wands, and the *hachimaki* (literally, "headband") that wraps around the basket. The elaborate decorations added to the top of the *bonden*, known as the *atamakazari*, must have a base of 120 centimeters or smaller, and its height should not exceed 150 centimeters. At the turn of the nineteenth century, most decorations were made of bamboo, wire, and cloth, but modern decorations can include lightweight materials like Styrofoam, which has led to even more elaborate designs.