

## **The Hanagasa Odori Dance**

The Hanagasa Odori is the signature dance of Yamagata Prefecture, in which elaborately costumed dancers in sedge hats decorated with flower motifs perform in the streets. The origins of the dance can be traced to the shores of Obanazawa's Lake Tokura.

Tokura is an artificial lake, built as a reservoir for rice cultivation. About 70,000 men and women from nearby communities labored for two years to build the embankment. Groups of workers leveled the earth by pounding it with 15-kilogram stones attached to ropes. This type of labor requires close coordination, so the workers chanted to maintain the rhythm of their work. This chanting developed into a work song. As they sang, they would sometimes dance with their sedge hats in hand, which were worn to keep off the sun. These songs and dances were loosely codified, and when the construction of Lake Tokura was completed in 1921, over 100 workers performed as part of the late August harvest festival held at Obananazawa's Suwa Shrine. This performance marked the birth of the Hanagasa Odori.

These days five types of Hanagasa Odori remain, and the Obanazawa Hangasa Festival is one of the town's main summer events. The current festival is held on August 27 and 28, and originated from the Suwa Shrine Festival, in which a procession of dancers made its way from Suwa Shrine into town on August 27. The main event sees a parade of dancers perform in Obanazawa's city center on August 28.