**Seasonal Prayers and Traditions**

**Overview**

Numerous festivals and rituals are held at shrines, temples, mountains, fields, seashores, and homes in the Wakasa region throughout the year. They range from rites performed for deities of the fields to lively parades celebrating good harvests and seaside rituals asking for calm waters. This diversity reflects the various lifestyles and occupations of the people, as well as the trade-driven influences that shaped the beliefs and customs in the region. Passing down these traditions from generation to generation, people mark the seasons much as their ancestors did.

**Learn More**

*New Year’s*

The New Year is a time to cleanse oneself and the community of the misfortunes of the previous year and to pray for good luck in the next year. *Yumi-uchi* (bow-shooting) rituals are performed throughout Wakasa to make predictions for the year by firing arrows at a special target. In the Toiwai (or Kitsunegari) ritual, children acting as representatives of the deities go around the village chanting or pounding on doors with ritual mallets or sticks to bestow good fortune.

*Spring and Summer*

Many rituals performed during the rice-planting season are focused on praying for a bountiful harvest. From late May to early June, about 30 rural communities in Wakasa hold Ta no Kami (deity of the fields) festivals, with children carrying small portable shrines (*mikoshi*) through the village and fields. In some communities, other children accompany the procession, chanting and striking the ground with ritual bamboo wands for purification.

*Obon*

In mid-August, the spirits of the ancestors are believed to return to visit their families, and rituals are held to welcome the spirits and later send them back safely. One of the rites most representative of Obon is the Rokusai Nenbutsu, a Buddhist memorial service that includes dancing and chanting *nenbutsu* prayers to the rhythm of bells and drums for salvation and rebirth. The Rokusai Nenbutsu was brought from Kyoto centuries ago and is still performed in some 20 communities in Wakasa with variations in dance style, age of participants, and costumes. In the Matsuage fire ritual, another tradition that originated in Kyoto, a large torch is set up in a field, and at nightfall men throw burning bundles of kindling at the torch, attempting to light it.

In seaside communities, boats often feature in Obon festivities. One example is the Shoraibune Okuri (“boat sendoff”) ritual, in which ancestral spirits are provided with ritual ships for their return to the spirit realm at the end of their visit with the living. About eight communities still practice this tradition, building the ships from bamboo, rice and wheat straw, grass, and other materials, and decorating them with flags and colorful streamers. The ships are filled with offerings and floated out into the ocean.

*Fall and Winter*

Many rituals are held during this time to give offerings to the deities in nature to thank them for a good harvest or protection. On the Oshima Peninsula, there is a religious practice called Niso no Mori, in which distant ancestors are venerated as deities at small, remote altars in the sacred areas of local woodlands or at the foot of mountains. This includes the Shimotsuki no Senzo (“worshipping ancestors in the eleventh month”) festival, in which special offerings are presented at the altars in the woods in late November or December. During the Yama no Kami festivals for the mountain deities, which are celebrated throughout the Wakasa region, similar offerings are put on small altars in the winter months. This is followed by a special feast, and working in the mountains on those days is forbidden.

**Exhibition Items**

The objects in this room represent the diverse seasonal festivals and rituals of the Wakasa region. The “New Year’s” section displays wooden mallets used by children to bring good luck to village households. The “Spring and Summer” section includes a portable shrine for a rice field deity. It is made mostly of bamboo, wheat, and straw and demonstrates how natural fibers are skillfully woven together to create shapes and decorations. The “Obon” section contains examples of the musical instruments used in the Rokusai Nenbutsu, such as the characteristic *kane* bells and handheld *shimedaiko* drums. The *shoraibune* ships are represented with a large, 2/3 scale model. In the “Fall and Winter” section, realistic food models illustrate offerings presented to ancient deities. In the case of the Yama no Kami festival, offerings include *okoze* stonefish, believed to appease a mountain goddess who is jealous of beautiful women, as well as 12 wooden tablets with drawings of women that are thought to be “substitutes” for sacrifices.