

Town Festivals and Performing Arts

Overview

In the Edo period (1603–1867), Obama flourished as a port and a castle town. During that time, religious influences and a general increase in wealth contributed to the development of both elegant and lively festivities that contrasted with the simpler traditions observed in rural areas. Large floats, complex dances, and rich costumes became characteristic for the town festivals of Obama, some of which have been held for centuries and continue annually to this day.

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Urban Festivals in Obama

Celebrations in towns like Obama were larger and more extravagant than festivals held in primarily agricultural and fishing communities. Major holidays such as the New Year, Setsubun (the day before the beginning of spring), and Obon honoring the spirits of ancestors in the summer were especially popular. Energetic dances and captivating performances were held both to worship the deities and for entertainment. Wealthy merchants made generous donations for the events, and a great number of people participated in the celebrations. Thus, Obama festivals could be grand, elaborate affairs that lasted for days and included religious services, artistic performances, and general merrymaking.

Influence of Other Regions

The festivals of Obama were often influenced by the culture and traditions of Kyoto, as Obama was a port town that specialized in maritime trade and transportation of goods to the capital of the time. When the Sakai family of the Kawagoe domain (present-day Saitama Prefecture) became lords of the Obama domain in the early seventeenth century, they brought with them performance styles that were popular in eastern Japan. One of these, the Unpin Jishi lion dance, is still performed in one of Obama's wards.

Obama Gion Festival and Hoze Festival

A prime example of the grand urban festivals of old Obama was the Gion Festival of Hiromine Jinja Shrine. The Obama Gion Festival picture scroll from the Edo period owned by the shrine depicts a lively procession of floats, musicians, dancers, costumed participants, and spectators, demonstrating the impressive scale of the festival at the time. The influence of the famous Gion Festival of Kyoto can be seen in the large floats,

festival music, and pole-wielding *bofuri* dancers. Some of the performance aspects of the Obama Gion Festival have become part of the Hoze Festival held by Hachiman Jinja Shrine in mid-September. Neighborhood troupes and decorated floats travel through the city streets and perform folk arts, honoring local traditions that have been passed down for several hundred years.

Exhibition Items

This section primarily displays mannequins dressed in costumes that are used in urban festivals of the Wakasa region. Most of them represent the performers who participate in the Hoze Festival. The *bofuri* pole wielder wears an exotic outfit and a head covering made of long, pale hair; the *odaiko* drummer is dressed in a distinctive yellow kimono with black patterns. The flute player from the kagura music troupe pairs a yellow kimono with a sedge hat that is lined with dangling charms and hides the performer's face behind a red veil. The Unpin Jishi dancer wears a lion headdress topped with dark feathers. Other costumes include the Red Yase, a figure said to banish misfortune by chasing people with the ritual weapon it holds, and Okobe, a comical figure with a large head made from a fish basket, who appears as entertainment alongside some *bofuri* groups. On the wall behind the mannequins are enlarged images from the illustrated scroll depicting the Gion Festival as it was celebrated in Obama some 150 years ago.