

## Sannō Festival

The Sannō Festival is held every spring against a backdrop of cherry blossoms at Hiyoshi Taisha Shrine. It is a celebration of birth and new life through the veneration of the shrine's seven main deities.

The festival begins on the first Sunday in March, when the *mikoshi* portable shrines for the deities Kamotamayorihime and Ōyamakui no kami are carried up Mt. Hachiōji to Sannomiya Shrine and Ushiogū Shrine. More than a month later, on the evening of April 12, the deities are carried back down the steep path to Higashi Hongū (Eastern Main Shrine).

The deities Kamotamayorihime and Ōyamakui are considered to be husband and wife. They dwell separately in their own shrines and only meet once a year during this festival. After the deities arrive at the worship hall of the Higashi Hongū, the poles of their *mikoshi* are tied together, symbolizing the physical union of the couple. During the night, it is believed a divine conception occurs.

The next morning (April 13), the two *mikoshi* are transported to a nearby hall called the Ōmandokoro along with two more *mikoshi* bearing the deities of Higashi Hongū and Jugegū Shrine. Celebratory events are held throughout the day in anticipation of the imminent birth, including a flower parade, an offering of tea grown in Hiyoshi Taisha's sacred tea field, and the presentation of gifts from worshippers, many of which are children's toys.

That evening, all four *mikoshi* are rocked back and forth with great energy and vigor for about two hours, symbolizing the labor of Kamotamayorihime. Finally, upon a signal, the poles of all four *mikoshi* are slammed forward, indicating the birth. The *mikoshi* are then carried at breakneck speed to Nishi Hongū (Western Main Shrine), where they join the *mikoshi* of the other three shrines.

On the following day (April 14), Buddhist monks from Enryakuji Temple on Mt. Hiei visit Hiyoshi Taisha. The monks place offerings before Nishi Hongū, and the chief abbot recites the *Heart Sutra*.

During the afternoon, a huge *sakaki* tree branch is pulled up the road to Hiyoshi Taisha, symbolizing the arrival of Ōnamuchi, the deity of Nishi Hongū. The seven *mikoshi* then depart the shrine precincts for the shore of Lake Biwa, where they are carried by barge to nearby Karasaki Jinja Shrine. After a brief sojourn there, the *mikoshi* wind their way through the local neighborhoods on their return to Hiyoshi Taisha. In the evening, the *mikoshi* are all returned to their storehouses at their respective shrines.

This series of events is the culmination of the efforts of hundreds of local people, and serves to maintain and strengthen community ties, in addition to celebrating the deities of Hiyoshi Taisha and a heavenly birth.